And The Came Spring

John Hargrave

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AND THEN CAME SPRING

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AND THEN CAME SPRING

BY

JOHN HARGRAVE

AUTHOR OF

"HARBOTTLE," "YOUNG WINKLE"

THE CENTURY CO.

New York & London

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I

MR. BIRTWISTLE AT HOME

GOD, using his synoptic eye in fourth dimensional perspective, must have seen that Northern manufacturing town spill and spread across the fields like a blot of ink on a green carpet.

Factories, factories, factories. Tall smokestacks, rising like a petrified forest, filling the sky with a murky pall. Block, Roller, and Stamp-cutters—Dobby Lag and Peg-makers—Spring and Doffing Plate Machinists . . .

In the midst of all this Mr. Birtwistle, of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co. Ltd., preparing to go home.

"Nothing more, is there?" he asked.

"No," said Miss Greenhalgh, "only about that letter from Mr. Pertwee—"

"I 'll see to that to-morrow."

Locking desk. Scarf. Overcoat . . . fumbling to find the arm-hole . . . got it! . . . and then flapping both arms like a penguin. Hat.

"Good night, Miss Greenhalgh."

"Good night, Mr. Birtwistle."

A moment later Mr. Birtwistle was borne swiftly and silently out of that limbo of cluttered warehouses, dimly lit offices, and the everlasting *ump-clank-fump, ump-*

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clank-jump of mechanical manufacture, back to his quiet home and his quiet but affectionate wife.

He arrived at the office at 9 A. M., he lunched at 1 P. M. and he left at 5:30 each evening. Things had to be kept going, and they kept Mr. Birtwistle going, like clockwork —*ump-clank-jump*—day in, day out; week after week, month by month, year by year—Birtwistle—Blenkin—Dodd—& Co.—for ever and ever, world without end.

It was not the work which bothered him; he liked Work, and he believed in Work—Honest Work. No, it was not that. In fact, he did not bother—he did not allow himself to bother—about anything. No time. Happy as the day is long; good, sound business, fair profits, nice home out in the country, devoted wife, grown-up children . . . Motoring, listening-in, cross-word puzzles, friends. Ups and downs, of course—what with strikes and post-war trade depression and one thing and another —but, on the whole, happy, contented, prosperous. Birtwistle—Blenkin—and Dodd—*ump-clank-jump*. 'More can a man want?

The car swept up the broad gravel drive and came to a standstill. Badley, the chauffeur-gardener, opened the door.

"There 's two parcels, sir," he said, "fish from Prosser's, and one I 'ad to call for at Watkins for Mrs. Birtwistle."

There was always some parcel or other. All kinds of things came up in the Daimler each evening, things which Badley had to collect—novels from Boots, wool for jumpers, Kodak films, shoes "on appro."

Badley attempted to relieve Mr. Birtwistle of the bulky parcel from Watkins. Mr. Birtwistle protested good-humoredly but vigorously.

"When I can't carry a parcel, Badley, I 'll tell you," he

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said. He had reached an age when he had begun to resent assistance from any one.

In the hall, now; he was rather proud of that hall, because he had planned it all out himself (with the help of Scoresby the architect), when he had built Orchard Leigh years ago.

"Is that you, Father?"

"Yes, my dear."

Out came Mrs. Birtwistle from the sitting-room. Her husband, struggling from his overcoat, paused to receive the customary kiss. It had no touch of fervency, but it was full of tender devotion; an affectionate little "*pp!*" against his cheek. She took his hat and coat from him and hung them up. She had done that every day for years, and, almost without knowing it, he resented it with a mild, inarticulate resentment. Every day, on his return from business, as soon as she heard him in the hall, she called, "Is that you, Father?" Always he said, "Yes, my dear." And now he knew exactly what was coming.

"Have you had a tiring day at the office, Godwin?" and immediately he felt fagged and weary.

"Yes, very tiring day, my dear, very tiring." He had made that automatic reply every evening for—how many years?

Of course, his slippers were put out ready for him before the fire. His wife, Ettie, always put his slippers to warm. Hermione, his one remaining unmarried daughter, came in whistling loudly:

"Do' wan' cher ter kiss me—no more!"

"Hermione, don't whistle when your father's tired out—"

"Oh, sorry, Mother . . . Hullo, Daddy."

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"Well, Hermione . . ." That happened every evening also. Following that, Mr. Birtwistle said:

"Well, I 'll go up and wash now—"

"You 'll find a clean towel put out ready for you, Godwin, on the radiator." She had said that yesterday, the day before yesterday, and the day before that . . . back and back into the past.

"Oh, that 's good . . . thanks." That was his unvarying reply. And he knew the six words which would reach him as he passed out of the door. They did:

"Don't be long, will you, Godwin?"

His reply came like clockwork: "No, my dear. Down in a minute."

People would "look after him." They "mothered" him. Badley helped him in and out, tucked rugs round his knees, and opened the door of the car—as if I can't open a door myself! Miss Greenhalgh, at the office, treated him like a baby; she even took his glasses away from him, and polished them on her handkerchief. He hated that, but he did not like to protest. Woman . . . chivalry. His wife took his hat and coat from him, put his slippers to warm, hushed the household "when Father comes in tired out," and generally fussed over him. Even Hermione had learnt to check her twenty-two-year-old boisterousness. "No, all right, Mother, I 'll wait till Father 's gone." None of these things worried Mr. Birtwistle, you understand, it had all grown up about him so very, very gradually; accumulations of years of quiet, steady-going home life had settled upon him and round about him, until Mr. Birtwistle was embedded in such a thick sedimentary deposit of Kindliness and Consideration that, like it or not, he was forced to play his part as a tired-out father who must be cared for and looked after.

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A feeling of mild resentment came to the surface of his mind now and then; a feeling which surprised him and which he dismissed at once. Long ago he had succumbed to his environment without knowing it, and when Ettie inquired each evening whether he had had "a tiring day at the office" he was always quite convinced that he had.

Mr. Birtwistle did not dress for dinner, but he was never "down in a minute." He was one of those men who linger and play about in the bath-room. He always let the hot-water tap run until it gushed and guggled with steaming, scalding water. And then he let the cold tap run in smoothly and gently until it was too cold. And then he had to fill up with more hot. One thing which enthralled him each morning and evening was the hot-water tap, which when turned off took up a position all askant.

When he turned it straight the hot water dribbled, but he always fiddled about with it in the hope of getting it right. The bath-room at Orchard Leigh was a sort of little play-room where he could splash and preen and whistle and hum without being helped by any one. Sometimes the soap had worn away to such a thin sliver that it broke up and went whirling into the vortex of the gurgling waste. Then he would hunt about at the top of linen cupboard, on the shelf amongst the heliotrope bath-salts, or in his wife's bedroom, for a new tablet. He loved that. Great fun.

"Father," Ettie would say later, having discovered the escapade, "there was n't any soap! Why did n't you tell me?"

"Oh, I found it all right, my dear."

The meal over and done with, Mr. Birtwistle settled into his arm-chair and began to fill his pipe. First of all

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he knocked it sharply three times—*tat-at-at!*—in the fireplace. Then he blew down it. After this he scrumbled about in his trousers pocket amongst a bunch of keys and some coppers, until he fished out an old penknife. *Scrape, scrape, scrape.* Knocking it out again. Blowing through it again. Rummaging for his pouch. Unfolding it. Fiddling and twiddling the "Three Nuns" tobacco. Stuffing the bowl full to overflowing. Scrabbling in his coat pockets for a match.

"I always mean to make you some spills, Godwin. Hermione, is there a match on the mantelpiece for your father?"

Lighting the pipe. Won't draw. Poking at it with the penknife. Easing it up. Pushing it down. Sucking at it. Another match. *Puff, puff, puff.*

"I say! What about going round to see the Ponces?"

"My dear, your father's much too tired—"

"M-yes, I am a bit fagged to-night. I don't think I will, Hermione. But you two go, if you'd like to."

"No, we can't leave you all alone like that, Father. Besides, you're only home in the evenings." . . . Pipe's gone out.

Mrs. Birtwistle winding a hank of violent magenta wool; Hermione holding it for her.

"Rather a nice color, don't you think, Father?"

"Oh, very nice, my dear . . . yes, very nice."

End of the woollen conversation. Pipe out again.

Mr. Birtwistle makes a movement as if to leave his chair in the direction of the listening-in set over by the window seat.

"I'll go, Daddy!" Hermione dashes for the valves and starts twisting switches. Father relapses into his

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chair. It's no good. He's out-manœuvred. They won't let him do anything.

And so the evening wears away pleasantly enough: father, pipe; mother, wool; daughter, valves. Sometimes there were variations, such as: father, pipe; mother, crossword; daughter, dictionary.

"Something, something, E, something . . ."

Yesterday it had been: father, pipe; mother, *Vogue;* daughter, "undies."

"Atmospherics bad to-night," said Hermione.

Sheee-whooo-o-o! Whoo-Ooo-oo-o! whistled the loud speaker.

"Um, they do seem bad to-night," said Father, "let me see if I can't—"

"No, it's all right, Daddy; I've got it now."

"She knows," said Ettie; "she's awfully good at it." Then a sudden thought: "We must n't forget your Ovaltine, Father. I'll ring for it." Every night at 10:45 she made this sudden remembrance.

"Oo! I don't know that I really want it, my dear."

Every night Mr. Birtwistle tried to escape.

"You know you won't sleep without it. You'd much better have it, Godwin."

"Oh, very well, my dear."

Four years before Godwin had had a mild attack of influenza, with one sleepless night. Ovaltine had been instituted, and from that night on to this Ovaltine was compulsory.

Mr. Birtwistle drank his Ovaltine, stood up, yawned, took out his watch and said: "Well, my dears, what about bed?" and so the ritual of Orchard Leigh drew to its appointed term. Another day had come to an end. To-

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morrow it would begin again—shaving in the bath-room, twiddling the hot-water tap, until he came again to Ovaltine, and "Well, my dears, what about bed?"

Mr. Godwin Birtwistle was not a man of moods. He was one of those big-hearted, North-country business men, with an emphatic handclasp, broad shoulders, a wreathing smile, and a homely manner.

A little sparse on the top of his head, his hair showed but a trace of gray at the age of fifty-five. His clean-shaven face was an oblong of contentment out of which bulged gray eyes, heavily lidded; eyes which seemed to say "Well, here we are; we've just popped out!" His mouth, sagging a little at each corner, was no more than a horizontal slit above a comfortable, dimpled chin, beginning to double itself. His life had been one long unbroken sequence of Home and Business; even the war had not dislocated the even flow of his existence.

"Will you be going to the office to-morrow, Godwin?"

"See now, to-morrow . . . Saturday. Well, yes, I think I shall just look in in the morning."

"I mean, will you be home to lunch?"

"M-no. No, I don't think I shall. I shall probably go on to the club for lunch and do nine holes—not more. Do me good."

"Yes. Only *don't* overdo it, will you? You walk miles and miles over those links till you're dog-tired."

"No, no. I sha'n't overdo it, my dear. Nine holes . . . not more."

Mr. Birtwistle lunched at the Woodlea Golf-Club on this particular Saturday, and lunched well. He strolled into the smoking-room went *tat-at-at!* with his pipe, and

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chatted with Ponce and Raeburn and young Liversidge. Then he sank into a comfortable chair.

No sense in overdoing it, especially just after lunch. Have a bit of a rest first. M-m, bit of a rest and quiet smoke, eh? Feel a bit sleepy. Must have put in more work at the office than I meant to this morning. Try my luck in about half an hour or so . . .

The pipe went out, the head fell back, the eyes closed, and the mouth began to relax. Then the pipe slid from his mouth, wabbled down his waistcoat and came to rest in a rumpled hollow of trouser. The horizontal slit gaped vacantly. Mr. Birtwistle slept. He "came to" slowly, with his eyes still closed. He was awake, now, but he made no effort to rouse himself. To all appearances he still slumbered.

Voices, close at hand: " . . . Old Birtwistle. Um . . . just about past it, these days. None of us get any younger, I s'pose. Bit of a fag for the old chap to get round nowadays . . . must be getting on . . ."

Mr. Birtwistle glanced out of one eye. Ponce and Hardwick talking together, sitting quite close to him in the next two chairs.

They don't know I heard them. Old Birtwistle. *Old* Birtwistle. That's me. Old. Past it. Can't get round these days. Getting on. That's what they think about me. Played out.

Every one treats me as if I were old and past it. Am I old? I don't feel a bit old. No. Fifty-five. That is n't *old*. So that's what Ponce and Hardwick think . . . Old Birtwistle . . . H'm. Queer. I've noticed other people . . . same sort of thing. Do I look old? Going a bit gray, but I'm as fit as they make 'em. They seem

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to take it for granted that I 'm old. Well, I don't feel a day older than twenty-five or thirty, at the most. Not a day. I don't like this "old" business.

That snatch of conversation about himself, overheard at the club, cut right home to a very tender spot in Mr. Birtwistle's sensibilities. It hurt him. He tried to brush it aside and think no more about it, but it kept recurring in his mind.

Old Birtwistle. They were talking about me. Saying I was past it, these days. Old. I 'm not old.

Those words had wounded him deeply in a secret place. He never said a word to any one about what he had overheard, but it had touched him on the quick.

Hard-headed business man that he was, those few words upset him astonishingly. He was amazed to find how much they upset him. The war, strikes, lock-outs, his wife's serious illness years before—nothing had ever upset him and harassed his mind as this did. Old Birtwistle . . .

It opened his eyes to a whole network of tiny incidents and remarks. He became supersensitive in the extreme.

"Carry yer bag, sir?" said a grubby urchin.

"No! I 'm well able to carry my own bag," said Mr. Birtwistle, glaring at him.

He began to feel the pressure of his home environment upon him. He made a few feeble efforts to assert his youth and vigor, and failed.

"My dear, I really don't want this Ovaltine, you know."

"You know you won't sleep without it. Now, do be guided by me, Godwin, and—"

"Oh, very well, my dear."

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He made a point, now, of opening the door of his Daimler before Badley could hop out of the driver's seat. He even tried to hang up his hat and coat before Ettie could reach him, but he never succeeded.

I hate being treated as if I were a semi-invalid. I am not. I am not old and past it. Not a bit.

But there was no escape from that overwhelming encrustation of Kindliness and Consideration at Orchard Leigh.

I like to hear Hermione whistling and laughing and sing at the top of her voice. I don't *want* the place hushed as if I were dying.

But the routine went on:

"Is that you, Father? . . . Have you had a tiring day at the office?" . . . and Mr. Birtwistle could not break free from his established rôle.

"Don't thump that dreadful rag-time music on the piano, Hermione; your father's just come in—"

"Oh, all right, Mother. Hullo, Daddy."

(But I like it. I *like* her to thump. I *want* her to thump. I'm not old. I'm not.)

"Well, Hermione . . ." And the ritual went on inevitably toward Ovaltine and bed.

The week-ends conformed rigidly to the Orchard Leigh ordinance. Week-day or Sunday, the fixed observances of the Ancient and Unalterable Domestic Rite went forward without interruption.

Sunday began with Ethel bringing in his early cup of tea. Then Hermione calling out:

"Father, did you hear the gong go?"

"Yah . . . 'ight . . . 'ar-b'long," came the voice of Mr. Birtwistle, the words smudged and blurred by the

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flolloping lather of his shaving-brush. Then Ettie tapping at the bath-room door.

"Yeh? . . . Or'igh . . . sha'b'long."

"I put a new blade in your Gillette, Godwin, the old one looked so rusty."

"Oh . . . 'hanks, my 'ear . . . 'hanks."

Thought some one had been fiddling about with the handle. Not screwed up properly. Queer they think I can't even change my own razor blades. . . . Very kind, and all that, of course. Still . . .

"I do wish Daddy 'd hurry up! I'm ravenous."

"My dear, it 's *so* good for him to have a rest on Sundays; don't hurry him."

Father came down in his navy-blue suit and black tie (week-days: dark-gray suit and dark-blue tie). Mother and daughter looked up for the three cryptic words:

"Well, my dears . . ."

Right! Now we can start breakfast.

"I told Ethel not to bring breakfast in, because I know you like to have plenty of time on Sunday mornings, and the bacon *is* so horrid when it 's cold!"

"Ah . . . yes. Well . . . sorry I 'm late, my dears."

"But it 's so good for you to have a rest one day in the week. Hermione, ring the bell, then Ethel 'll know Father 's come down."

I wish they would n't wait for me. Still, very nice of them.

No one went to church, and no one ever thought of suggesting such a thing; and yet the Birtwistle household had all been received into the Established Church of England. Hermione had finally stopped going, at the age of seventeen or eighteen. According to the Birtwistle code only children went to church. As they reached the age of dis-

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cretion this infantile imposition automatically lapsed, and no questions asked. After that the church attendances included only Easter Sunday, with a marriage or a funeral, as the case might be.

Breakfast over, Father returned to his "study" and read the "Sunday Times" the "Observer," and the "Weekly Despatch," in a cloud of tobacco smoke. During that period no one dared so much as to speak in the hall, much less open the study door.

"S-sh! Father's reading the paper."

The household had to tiptoe past the study door.

"Daddy's got that new 'Tatler,' Mother; could n't I creep in and get it?"

"I would n't, Hermione; don't disturb him. He does n't get much peace except on Sunday."

"Oh, all right, Mother, I'll wait."

Father emerged from his "fug" in the study at 11 A. M., and proceeded to get his hat and stick for a stroll round the garden with Gruff, the Irish terrier. Hermione crept into the study and withdrew the "Tatler" privily.

All this was according to the Orchard Leigh tradition.

"I say! What about a walk?"

"I'm sure Father's had quite enough exercise, what with his golf all yesterday afternoon."

"Oo, I did n't do much, my dear; nothing to speak of." He did not like to tell of his slumber.

"I'm sure you ought to take it easy, Godwin; you'll be tired out; it's Monday to-morrow."

"Oh, very well, my dear, p'raps you're right. Is n't Harry coming in?" Harry was engaged to Hermione.

"Coming in after tea, Daddy."

"Oh, that's right."

After lunch Mr. Birtwistle looked at the paper again

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and snoozed till nearly tea-time. After tea Harry appeared, a tall, pink-faced young fellow with bright blue eyes and sandy hair.

"I say! What about Mah Jongg?"

"Not on Sunday, my dear," said Ettie.

"Why not? It's all right."

"Think what the servants would say—"

"Oh, blow the servants! What about it, Daddy?"

"Um . . . well, I don't know, my dear. I don't think I will. Lazy."

Harry and Hermione drifted into the garden.

At last Sunday worked its way toward Ovaltine and bed. Monday morning at nine found Mr. Birtwistle in his office as usual, directing the affairs of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co.

"Any letters, Miss Greenhalgh?"

"Yes, they're all on your desk, Mr. Birtwistle."

Mr. Birtwistle pinched his reading-glasses on his nose and attended to business.

At 10:42 he looked up suddenly, and said:

"Would you consider a man of fifty-five old, Miss Greenhalgh?—past it?"

"Well, of course," said Miss Greenhalgh, rather taken aback, "that would depend."

"On what?"

"Oh, well, some men never seem to get old, do they? —not what you'd *call* old, I mean. My old father lived to be eighty-nine and even *then* he had the use of all his faculties, right up to the last! But, why d'you ask such a funny question?"

"Oh, nothing . . . nothing much. Had a bit of an argument about it . . . about a man I know . . . with . . . with a friend of mine; that's all. Did we ever

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receive an invoice dated July third from The Willard Shipping Company?"

This week Mr. Birtwistle was exceptionally busy. Important board meetings ahead. Confidential discussions with Mr. Dodd (Blenkin had died seven years before) about a merger scheme, or some sort of amalgamation, with The Northern Steel Manufacturing Co. Ltd. of Sheffield and London. Official notes. Typed reports.

There was some complication which held things up; some agreement of 1919 between Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co. and the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation. There were matters which had to be straightened out and cleared up before negotiations could be resumed with the Northern Steel Manufacturing Co.

Mr. Dodd spoke about having to go up to London for a special meeting.

"There 'll be other meetings," said Mr. Dodd; "bound to be. Besides, if this arrangement with the Northern Steel Co. comes off, we shall have to go up to London at least once a month, Birtwistle."

"When 's this first meeting with the Iron and Steel Trades Executive?"

"Sometime next month. We 'll go up together. How long is it since you were up in London?"

"Nineteen-twenty . . . spring of nineteen-twenty, I think."

"Well, it 'll be a bit of ā jaunt for both of us, eh?"

"Yes."

"And if it 's a regular thing—well, we 'll have to take it in turn sometimes, if we can't both get away together."

London! The very idea of it cheered Mr. Birtwistle as it might cheer a school-boy.

He broke the news gently to his wife.

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"Important changes taking place just now, my dear. Negotiations, very delicate and difficult questions to settle. . . . May have to go up to London next month. Special board meetings. Can't be done by letter. Get things fixed up. . . . This matter of the Northern Steel Company I told you about last year. Sir Eli Smith."

"Can't they settle it without you? It's *such* a journey and *so* wretched for you in hotels with no one to look after you or anything. Can't Mr. Dodd go?"

"Oh, we shall both have to go. I daresay Pertwee and one or two others from the Northern Steel Company will go up with us."

"What a bother it all is for you! You must n't forget to take the Monster Thermos in the train. The tea in the restaurant cars is perfectly dreadful."

"Oh, it 'll only be for a day and a night, I expect. Back the next day."

"Well, it *is* a nuisance for you."

"Got to be done, my dear."

"You 'll stay at the Euston Court, as you did before, won't you?"

"Oh yes, yes; at the Euston Court."

"Is n't it too bad, Hermione?"

"What, Mother?"

"Father 's got to go all the way up to London next month for some wretched board meeting."

"London? My stars! I wish *I* could!"

"Don't be so silly, Hermione. You know how exhausted he 'll be, what with the strain of all these important business matters on hand, after a weary train journey. It is n't as if he' d have a minute to spare, and they never think of all the discomfort and worry."

"Well," said Mr. Birtwistle, "I 'll go up and wash now."

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"You 'll find a clean towel put out ready for you, Godwin, on the radiator."

"Oh, that 's good. Thanks."

London. I 'd rather like to have a look round London again. Long time since I was up there. Change might do me good. Getting a bit stale. Take me out of myself. Been a bit broody lately . . . Yes, rather glad this London trip 's fixed up. Lot of extra work, but still . . .

He glanced at himself in his shaving-mirror. Old? Old? Huh! Just as young as ever I was.

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II

MR. BIRTWISTLE IN LONDON

"MY dear fellow," said Dodd, a day or two before the journey to London, "you don't want to stay at the Euston Court Hotel. Whatchoo wanter stay at the Euston Court for?"

"Oo, I don't know. I usually have. It's near the station."

"Why don't you make a bit of a holiday of it? Have a look round. Stay at the Hotel Parisienne, or somewhere like that."

"Um?"

"Of course. Take my advice, old chap, and book a room at the Parisienne. Jolly people, dancing—all that. What d' you generally do at the Euston Court?"

"Oh, nothing much."

"Sit and smoke in the smoking-room, eh? You don't wanter do that. Not often in London. You wanter join in with what's on. Drop into a show . . . talk . . . meet the boys . . . bottle of fizz. Don't wanter mooch about. Make a bit of a ran-dan of it. Do yer good."

"Ah . . . well, I might try the Parisienne," said Mr. Birtwistle.

"That's it! Pertwee and the rest of 'em always stay there. We shall all be together."

Mr. Birtwistle did his best to suppress his excitement.

"'Fraid all this Northern Steel business 'll mean going

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up to London a good deal," he announced to Miss Greenhalgh.

"Such a long journey for you! . . . Still, I s'pose you must go, Mr Birtwistle?"

"'Fraid so . . . yes, 'fraid so. All in the day's work."

He did not quite like to book a room at the Hotel Parisienne himself, so he got Brown, the chief warehouse clerk, to telephone through for him.

At home he said:

"I shall stay at the Hotel Parisienne, my dear, this time—"

"Not at the Euston Court, Godwin?"

"No. . . . Well you see, Dodd and Pertwee and the rest of them 'll be at the Parisienne, and I ought to be in constant touch with them all the time."

"Yes, of course."

It shocked him just a little to find what a pleasurable feeling this projected visit to London gave him. It seemed disloyal, in some intangible way, to Ettie and Orchard Leigh and all the Kindliness and Consideration.

Not that Ettie would be left alone. There were Hermione and her fiancé; there was his eldest daughter Dot, who had married Mr. Tilberthwaite and who now had two children and lived at Rollerton only six miles away. There was Camilla, who had married Mr. Norton, of Norton & Fyle, the electrical people, who lived at New Park Fields just the other side of the town. And there was Frank, who had married Miss Briscoe, the daughter of Sir Thomas Briscoe, M.P., the head of the Briscoe Patent Ferro-Concrete (1920) Co. Ltd.

The Birtwistles had spread out all round Orchard Leigh, and soon Harry would take Hermione off. Mr. Birtwistle was a little sad about that sometimes.

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Ah well, we 've done the best we could by them. They 've been good children to us, all of them. Grown up now, with their own lives to attend to. . . . All happily married. Hermione 'll be the last to go. She 's a good girl. Harry 's a nice, upright, hard-working young fellow, too.

Every now and then his married offspring would look in at Orchard Leigh, and they would meet unexpectedly in the town. Some one would tap him on the shoulder in Church Street, in Old Millgate Lane, or in the Square.

"Hullo, Father!"

"Well, Camilla, how 's George?" or, "Well, Dot, how 's Teddy?" or, "Well, Frank, how 's Alice?"

"Father! You have n't come out without your overcoat!"

They were always meeting each other like that. He liked those meetings with his grown-up family. They all liked it.

"So nice to have you all about us so that you can drop in and cheer us up in our old age," Mrs. Birtwistle would say. "Some families seem to drift apart and lose touch so."

In our old age—but Mr. Birtwistle did not feel old. No, not a bit old.

The news of Father's forthcoming visit to London on important business soon spread from Orchard Leigh to the local branches of the Birtwistle lineage. It was an event in their uneventful provincial existence; it was something new to discuss.

Lately, however, since the unfortunate "Old Birtwistle" incident at the golf club, Mr. Birtwistle had begun to notice a certain attitude toward him from his grown-up family of his, which he had always dimly sensed.

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No doubt about it, he told himself, I can't help feeling they look upon me as an Old Buffer. Poor Old Father sort of thing. I s'pose I have n't bothered to notice it before. I 'm the Old Fruit, the Old Bean . . . Paterfamilias . . . as if I were past it, as that fellow Ponce said. Wonder if they 're right? . . . The Old Chap . . . "Oh, no, Father would n't care about that sort of thing"—I remember that. The Circus. Elephants, sea-lions, roundabouts. "Oh, no, Father won't go on the roundabouts . . ." And I did n't. But I wanted to go on the roundabouts; I like roundabouts and swings and cocoanut shies. They all seem to think I 'm too old. Even when they were small children, Ettie used to say "Don't bother your Father; he 's had *such* a tiring day at the office!" I 've always been Poor Old Father. Ah, well, they 're all very good to me. Ettie 's been a good wife and a splendid mother. I 've no cause to complain. This trip to London 'll do me good. I seem to be getting a bit touchy, these days, about nothing. . . . H'm, yes. Well now, what about that order from Czecho Slovakia?

"I 've put the Monster Thermos in the car, Father; you won't forget it, will you?"

"No, my dear."

"And I packed five clean handkerchiefs in your case; it 's so horrid to run short of clean handkerchiefs."

"Oh, thanks . . . thanks, my dear."

"And I 've tucked your slippers in between your pajamas and your woolly pants."

"Oh, that 's fine."

"And you 'll find your shaving-brush down at the side in the sponge-bag, with a new tablet of soap. Your dress suit 's right at the bottom, Godwin."

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"Right you are, my dear."

"And I 've put your links in the cuffs all ready for you, so dont go hunting about for them, will you?"

"No, no, I 'll remember."

"I put in two new stiff shirts, because London does make things so dreadfully grubby—in case you want a change."

"Good."

"I thought you would n't want another vest, so I did n't put one in."

"No, that 's right."

"And I slipped a hot-water bottle down at the left-hand side, under your collar-box, in case it 's cold. *Do* get them to fill it for you. You never know whether they 've aired the sheets properly; it would be so awful if you got rheumatic fever or anything."

"Yes . . . Well, if it 's cold . . ."

"And—listen, Godwin—I 've put a new tin of Ovaltine, with a pair of clean socks wrapped round it, right on top. Don't forget to take it, will you? Ask them for a glass of hot milk, and then just stir it in; it's quite easy. I've put a teaspoon in, so you need n't ask for that."

"Oh, well, if I find I can't—"

"Now do say you will, Godwin! You know what a lot of good it 's done you."

"Oh, all right, my dear."

"I don't think I 've forgotten anything."

" 'Sure you have n't. I 'll be all right."

"D' you think you 'd like your woolly night socks?"

"No, no. I sha'n't want them."

"You will try not to get cold, won't you?"

"I will, my dear."

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"Don't let them keep you up talking; you must get a good rest. I told Mr. Dodd yesterday he was n't to let you get knocked up."

"Oh, he 'll look after me."

"You 'll telephone if anything goes wrong?"

"I will, my dear."

"And send us a card saying you 've arrived safely."

"Yes, yes."

"Now have a good breakfast, because you don't know when you 'll get another good meal. There 's no hurry. Badley won't be round until half-past."

Like setting off for Outer Mongolia, or the Yukon, or somewhere.

"I 've got your hat and coat all ready; you 'll take an umbrella with you, won't you?" Ettie's voice from the hall.

"Oo, I don't think I shall need an umbrella." Mr. Birtwistle always struggled against unbrellas.

"You will, Godwin. You may get soaked through."

"Oh, all right, my dear."

"I 've put your pipe and pouch in your overcoat pocket."

"Oh, right you are."

"Hermione, run and get a box of matches for your Father from the kitchen."

Mr. Birtwistle finished his toast and marmalade.

"Have you got your keys, Godwin?"

"Yes; got 'em, thanks."

"What about your check-book?"

"Got that, too."

"Fountain-pen?"

"Yes."

(Hermione and Ettie in the hall. "My dear, we 've

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never got the sandwiches! Run and ask Ethel if she has them ready!")

"I sha'n't want sandwiches, my dear," called Mr. Birtwistle.

"You must take them, Godwin, in case you can't get anything on the train."

"There's a restaurant car, my dear; I've booked a seat."

"Well, anyhow, you'd better take them. Meals on the train are not at all like you'd get at home. No nourishment. I've put a small packet of egg sandwiches nicely tied up in grease-proof paper, in your left-hand overcoat pocket. It's quite small. You never know; you may feel you want something."

"Oh . . . yes, all right." Do hate things stuffed in pockets. Bulging.

"You'll take your gray reindeer gloves. I've put them with your hat."

"Yes."

"You're sure you won't take your leather motoring waistcoat with the warm woolly lining?"

"Oh, no, my dear. I sha'n't want it."

"I'm sure you'd better."

"No, I really don't want it."

("Don't you think he'd better, Hermione?")

However, Mr. Birtwistle escaped the leather jacket.

At last the Daimler arrived at the front door. Father was helped into his overcoat. His silk scarf was tucked in for him. His hat was given a final brush and handed to him. His umbrella was pushed upon him, and at last he took his farewell.

"*Do* take care of yourself, and don't overwork," and then:

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"Good-by,"—*pp!*—"good-by."

Hermione gave him a slapping kiss on the cheek.

"Good-by, my dears."

"Good-by, Father."

Badley opened the door of the car.

"Father! Father! you 've got your glasses, have n't you?" frantically from Ettie.

"Yes, I 've got 'em. 'By!"

"'By. Got all your papers and things?"

"Yes." Click. *Bur-r-r-rrrrrr* went the engine.

"Run and ask him if he 's got his fountain-pen."

"He said yes."

"I did n't see it in his waistcoat pocket, Hermione."

Mr. Birtwistle waving to them. They waving back. The car swept with a beautiful smooth *burrrr* down the twisting drive and out at the gates.

"He did take the sandwiches, did n't he?"

"Yes, Mother."

"I 'm sure it 'll be too much for him, this going up to London every month."

"P'r'aps he won't have to go."

"He will if this new arrangement comes off with the Northern Steel Company. It is n't as if he were a young man. They don't think of that."

"Poor old Daddy! But I expect he 'll look after himself."

"Yes, I hope he will. He does n't realize how tired out he gets. . . ."

As he waved he saw Ettie and Hermione, and then Orchard Leigh itself, slide from view. He saw the low gabled, green-slated roof, the tall stone chimneys, the white rough-cast walls with their rose-grown green trellis

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half-way up, like a crisscross dado all the way round, the green shutters with the heart-shaped fret, the leaded windows with their cream-colored casement hangings, and the flash of brass as the sun caught the polished bell-push; he saw the garage at the back with its green sliding door; Gruff's green kennel and the brown pot of water (with "Love me, Love my Dog" round the side) which Camilla had bought as a Christmas present for the dog. White rough-cast and apple-green paint—Orchard Leigh. In a moment Orchard Leigh was swept behind, the stone pillars each side of the drive gates flicked by, and the road dipped down toward the valley and the distant smoke pall of the town.

He could not help remembering how he had planned the building of Orchard Leigh years before—with Mr. Scoresby's help, of course. Very proud of Orchard Leigh. He remembered Scoresby with those architectural plans. He remembered the green hummocky field with half a dozen miserable-looking sheep bleating in it; a poor bare field—just grass. One of the sheep had a bronchial cough, terribly human. He remembered the first foundation trenches being pegged out, and Scoresby always pointing to his carefully drawn blue-prints.

Planning and building Orchard Leigh. Great fun that had been. Old Scoresby saying, "That's all right, Mr. Birtwistle, it's all on the plan. You tell Mrs. Birtwistle she'll have plenty of good, roomy cupboards." Even then, when they had lived in a smaller house nearer the town, he recalled a vague sense of—of being "Father." He had never been just Godwin. But there was no time to think that out; besides, Mr. Birtwistle disliked thinking things out. "These introspective people . . . morbid. Morbid egotism. I hate that."

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Nevertheless he was semi-conscious of some dim oppression from which, for a day or so, he was breaking free. London on business.

He found Dodd, Pertwee, and Cossett waiting for him. They got the 10:21 to Euston, first stop Rugby.

"You do' wanter smoke that filthy old brier, Birtwistle. Put it away an' have a cigar," said Mr. Dodd.

Mr. Pertwee said something about an examination of deeds regarding their London offices which would have to come up at the board meeting.

"No, damn that, Pertwee!" said Mr. Dodd. "We 're not going to talk shop till we get to business to-morrow morning. Ever hear the story of the Jew who took his wife to Blackpool? Eh? . . ."

Mr. Birtwistle and Mr. Pertwee and Mr. Cossett were very much pleased with the Jew story.

"That 's very good," said Mr. Birtwistle.

"Oh, *very* good!" said Pertwee.

"Reminds me of the man who went to his doctor because his wife complained of pains in her ankle—know it?" said Cossett.

Mr. Birtwistle rummaged about in his mind for a story to follow up this one. What was it? Something about an Englishman, a Scotsman, and an Irishman who fell in love with the same girl. The Englishman said, "Well, Jock, if you want the girl—" I 've got it!

"But that 's the story I told you last week," said Mr. Dodd.

"No, is it?"

" 'Course it is."

"Ha! Very good one," said Mr. Pertwee. "Very good. 'So that 'll be twelve and six, Mike, for running re-

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pairs,' says the Scotsman. Very good. I had n't heard that one."

Then Mr. Cossett said something about trade unions riddled with communism; and Mr. Baldwin.

"What we want," said Mr. Dodd, as if he were about to expound a totally new political outlook, "is a Business Government."

"Quite right," said Pertwee. "I 've said that all along."

"Baldwin 's got no punch," said Cossett.

"No ginger," said Dodd.

"Just letting things slide," said Birtwistle.

"If we could get rid of the whole damn lot of politicians," said Dodd, "the trade and industry of the country would right itself."

"Quite right," said Pertwee. "I 've always said that."

After that the industrial and political situation seemed to offer no further points for discussion. Mr. Dodd had already interdicted any talk of business matters, and so the conversation swung back inevitably to Women and Sex.

"Old Birtwistle here 's a regular boy when he gets away from home," chaffed Dodd.

"No, is he?" They laughed and joked and told more stories. Then Cossett leaned back and opened his "Times." A moment or so afterward Mr. Dodd followed suit with his "Daily Telegraph." Mr. Pertwee scanned the columns of the "Morning Post," while Mr. Birtwistle folded back his copy of "The Times." Mr. Dodd began to do the cross-word puzzle.

"Take your seats for the first luncheon, please!"

Birtwistle, in this congenial company, felt like a young actor who, having contracted to play the part of a "middle-aged married man" in a domestic farce called "Or-

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chard Leigh" which had run for thirty years, puts off his make-up and resumes his natural youthfulness.

The train, rushing steadily through flat fields, whisking past towns and villages in its headlong dash for London, seemed to turn his elation into a mechanical rhythm: *I'm blowed if I'm old!—I'm blowed if I'm old!—I'm blowed if I'm old!*

A pale autumnal sunshine was spread over London as the train ran slowly into Euston. Back streets and back yards hazed into a dim heliotrope mist.

"Let's all go to 'Hold It Down' at the Palladium to-night; what d'you say?" said Dodd.

"Splendid!" said Birtwistle. "Revue isn't it?"

"Yes; Lily Lewis and Ted Bawdy."

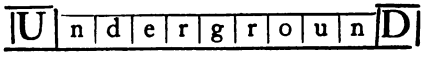
Mr. Birtwistle had never heard of them.

"Oh, Ted Bawdy's very clever," said Cossett. "Laughed till I cried, last time I saw him."

Mr. Birtwistle was game for anything. He felt cheerio-ish right through. London. Euston. Hotel Parisienne. Palladium. "Hold It Down!"

The pale yellow sunlight, filtering through the grime and soot of Euston Station, was not merely beautiful with a wan beauty of its own, to Mr. Birtwistle's eyes; Euston was positively romantic—the portal to a city of surging life where things happened. The capital of a vast empire—the metropolis—throbbing with potential unexpectedness. He liked it all.

He liked the friendly notices: WAY OUT and the funny old boxed-up:



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There was no Underground in his Northern manufacturing center. And here there were no tall smokestacks vomiting against the sky; no *ump-clank-fump* of machinery, no slag-heaps, no pit-head wheels, no pinched shawl-clad mill-girls shouting and clattering. None of this was so raw; not under the devastating heel of Mule, Dobby Lag, Ring Spindle, Woolcomb, Hackle, and Bobbin manufacture; the very words unknown. Much more mellow, all this, like the watery amber of the dying autumn sun fading away into the deepening mezzotint of a London afternoon.

He thrust his hand into his pocket for his pouch. The crackle of grease-proof paper. Egg sandwiches. Ettie. Orchard Leigh. How does one get rid of a packet of egg sandwiches in London? Give them away? He did not like to do that; might be laughed at. He did not bring them out for fear Dodd should see them and jeer at them good-humoredly, as he had jeered at the Euston Court Hotel. He resented Dodd's good-natured banter. It made him feel old; as if he were out of the running. So the egg sandwiches were left tightly tied up in their crackly paper in his pocket. He felt ashamed of them, as one might feel ashamed of elastic-sided boots. However, they reminded him suddenly about sending a post-card. It shocked him to find how near he had been to forgetting all about that post-card. Arrived at the Hotel Parisienne, he dumped his luggage, gave his companions the slip, and went off to buy a post-card. He bought one of St. Paul's looking up Ludgate Hill.

"Arrived safely," he wrote. "Good journey, quite comfortable. Just arrived . . ." What else should I say? . . . Er . . . "beautiful evening. Everything all right. Haste for post . . ." Plenty of posts out from

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London . . . still . . . "Haste for post . . ." What else? . . . "Traveled up with Dodd, Pertwee, and Cossett." . . . that's enough. "Love to you and Hermione and everyone. Father." That's that. Now they won't be worrying.

He went back to the hotel, pleased with himself, with life, with London, with everybody. That evening, after a really wonderful dinner, the four North-country manufacturers set out for the Palladium to witness "Hold It Down." The people, the talk, the jaunty, hiccoughing Hawaiian wailing music, the dinner, the lights . . . He never gave a thought to Orchard Leigh nor Ettie the whole evening. And then "Hold It Down" . . . Mr. Birtwistle had never been to a revue before.

"Old Birtwistle looks ten years younger already!" said Mr. Dodd, on their way to the show.

"Not so much of your 'Old Birtwistle'!" said Godwin.

"What about a Chicago Thunderbolt with just a peg of rum added to give us a kick before we go in?"

"I'm not used to cocktails," said Birtwistle.

"Oh, one won't hurt you, man! Come on."

Mr. Birtwistle was a tiny bit scared, but exhilarated. Jolly company. "Hold It Down" . . . Good chaps. This is miles better than moping about at the Euston Court by myself. I like this.

And the show—what a show! "Hold It Down!" Shingled beauty chorus—*whup!*—legs. Blue and green spot-lights on wriggly half-nakedness. Oh, very naked. See that one with the gilt hair and—there they come again! Legs. "Never mind the rain; let's do it again!"

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clickittyclickittyclickclickclickclack
clickittyclickittyclickclickclickclack
clickitty————————!
click————clickclickittyclick!
click————clickclickittyclick!
click————————!
swish—swish———●———!
click————————!
clack————————Bom!
Bom!

What's this?

Scene 2: "Bacchanal à la Camisole." *Scene by Benito.*

All through the performance the orchestra let out a syncopated saxophonic moan punctuated by an occasional clash and hoot. It seemed to run on like this:

Eyow-yow-ooo! Eeyow-yow-yallah-yooo!
Yallah-yooo!
Crash!

"Smoking Permitted," said the program. They smoked.

"Here's Lily Lewis!" whispered Cossett. "She's awfully good."

"Ah," said Birtwistle, expectantly. Lily Lewis was a sort of Russian Ballet Arabian Princess in pink, yellow, and black with, oh, lots of very leggy leg and a huge, glistening smile. She reminded Birtwistle of a Principal Boy in some local pantomime of his youth—"Dick Whittington." Singing now. Singing flat, dreadfully flat, but somehow, it did not matter. *Eyow-yow-ooo!* Not at all.

"Is n't she good?" said Cossett, "wonderful!"

Oh, yes, *Scene* 3: "Cameo in Cambodia."

"Sort of Foocherist effect," said Dodd.

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"Yeah . . . queer scenery," said Birtwistle.

"Ssh! listen," said Cossett.

"There's no one
Who loves me
Like . . . Eeyew!"

Rather silly song, but all so cheery, so bright!

Wonderful dancing, anyhow. Birtwistle lost himself in the whirl of color and legs.

"Magnificent dresses, are n't they?"

"Cost thousands to produce this thing."

Scene 14: "Fascismo Fantoccini: The Black Shirt Boys." And then came:

INTERVAL

Lights up. People talking, laughing, smoking.

"Come on," said Dodd. "Let's have one."

They had to rouse Birtwistle from his delightful reverie; he seemed to be fascinated, hypnotized, by the slow, noiseless descent of a great gray blank—a blank which was cutting him off from the fantastic whirlpool of pretty girls and pretty dresses, and legs:

SAFETY CURTAIN

"Wadjer think of it, Birtwistle?"

"Splendid! Spirit of carnival. Does one good."

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"I don't think much of that thing called 'Poudre Nildé'; nothing in it. But that song 'Yucatan'—absolutely It. Got 'em all hummin'. Made a hit with that song."

"Such a catchy tune," said Cossett.

Then the bell rang. They gulped their drinks, and hurried from the buffet for Part 11, *Scene* 15: "Banana Split!"

"Well," said Mr. Dodd, when they got back to the hotel after the show, "business to-morrow. I 'm turning in."

Mr. Birtwistle retired to his room. Cossett and Pertwee had already said good night. This was all very different from his other visit to London, years before. He seemed to have shaken off the habit of being Father. He was just Birtwistle now; and, yes, Dodd was quite right, he *felt* ten years younger. People did not fuss after him here. No one said, "Have you had a tiring day, Father?" There was no heavy domestic atmosphere surrounding him. No. He felt like a lumbering reptile suddenly pushed into an oxygenated world—a dinosaur skipping about like a lamb.

"Old?" he said to the wardrobe mirror. "Who the hell 's old? Fifty-five, my boy, and as spry as a cock-sparrow!" He went on thinking:

I 've let things settle down round me too much, back at Orchard Leigh. Somehow, these last ten or twenty years or so, I've let myself get slack . . . dull . . . took it for granted I was . . . well, Old Birtwistle, the married man getting on in years, past the prime, with a grown-up family all round me. Past the prime!

Then he caught sight of the new tin of Ovaltine and the teaspoon.

Very thoughtful of Ettie, but I really don't want it.

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She 's a good, kind creature, bless her heart. Ovaltine . . .

He came down the next morning as cheerful as a cricket.

That packet of egg sandwiches still bothered him. When the attendant helped him on with his overcoat (he did not resent this in the least) the grease-proof paper crackled. Mr. Birtwistle did not like to ask the attendant to dispose of them for him. You can't have egg sandwiches in your pocket at the Parisienne—not the Thing. One of these unemployed 'd be glad of them, poor devil. I might try to slip them into the hand of some wretched out-of-work—one of these women selling matches, perhaps. That was impossible. Before he had a chance to do any such thing he found himself with Dodd and the other two in a taxi on the way to the Northern Steel Company's London Office. Mr. Dodd was talking shop, now, very earnestly with Mr. Pertwee.

"When the two companies are finally amalgamated under this scheme," he was saying, "we shall have to go into the whole question of . . ."

"What I feel about the matter," said Birtwistle, rummaging about for a match to light his pipe, "is this—" damn those egg sandwiches!—"If we 're to sign an agreement which . . ."

The board meeting at Norvic House sat until 1:30 P. M. and then adjourned for lunch. It went on again until past 5:30 in the evening, and then it had not concluded the business.

"Well, anyhow," said Dodd, after it was over, "we have n't done so badly, Birtwistle. I hardly expected we should get so far with things."

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"What about this further meeting to-morrow?"

"Well, I shall have to get back on the eight o'clock this evening, Birtwistle. My idea is you'd better stay and see it out."

"Um, I dunno. I ought to get back, really, you know. I've got a lot of things waiting. Miss Greenhalgh can't see to them, nor can young Robinson."

"Oh, rot! I'll deal with anything that's really important. It's necessary for one of us to be at this meeting to-morrow, very necessary."

"Well, why not you?"

"I've got to go and meet the Secretary of the Federation of Sheet Metal Workers about this wages cut on Friday."

"Oh, well, I'll stay if you can't."

"Right! that's fixed up. Better send a wire to Orchard Leigh and tell your wife you've got to hang on for this meeting."

In this way it came about that Birtwistle found himself alone at the Parisienne, his co-director and the other two men having returned to the North. He had sent a telegram to Ettie:

BOARD MEETING TO-MORROW ALSO DETAINED URGENT RETURN FRIDAY IMPORTANT CANNOT MISS. GODWIN.

After that there was nothing special to do until 11 A.M. the next day. He did not mind that at all. In fact, he was rather glad to be rid of Dodd and the others. Good, sound fellows, all three, but somehow they reminded him of Steel and Coal and the North; they were a link with . . . all that . . . And Cossett talked too much. Yes, on the whole, Birtwistle preferred to be without them; he

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felt more independent. He liked to feel that he could look after himself.

He went out, deliberately leaving his umbrella, and walked up Regent Street toward Oxford Circus. He liked the sensation of being quite on his own. For thirty years he had succumbed to Kindliness and Consideration, until he had lost all independence, had become a mere cipher—Father. He did not feel like Father now. Shops and people, lights, policemen, taxis, flickering signs. "Oh, Father won't want to look at the shops."

This buoyant sensation of a new-found freedom, a new strength, a manliness, was not directly connected in his mind with the overwhelming monotony of the Orchard Leigh ménage. It was simply a realization of himself as being still untouched by old age, still capable, still vigorous. He did not realize fully, even now, that his family had, quite unconsciously and with the best intentions in the world, set up an environment in which Father had to be preserved and cared for with such deadly helpfulness and thoughtful deference that the poor man's home life was little more than that of a semi-invalid in an armchair.

Orchard Leigh, and every one in it, waited upon Father. Even Gruff was brought into it, "Now, Gruff, don't bark so loudly. You know Master's having a little rest after a *very* hard day at the office. Good doggie, then. There, there! Good doggie."

Orchard Leigh was run entirely for Father. It waited for Father to come home tired, and Father did come home tired. It warmed his slippers, and Father obediently accepted his warm slippers. It got everything ready for Father. It cooked for Father. It mended for Father.

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It hushed itself when Father was about. If anything went wrong, Father must not suffer. Every one ministered to Father and Father's needs, even when he did not need it. And now it was waiting for Father to come home tired and weary from his long train journey and the heavy responsibilities of important board meetings and delicate business negotiations in London.

Mr. Birtwistle did not know it in that way, and he never would have known anything at all but for those chance words overheard at the golf club.

All he knew was: They're dear, good folk, but they seem to think I can't lift a finger to help myself. I'm not old. No, I'm not old.

And along with that, and this wonderful new independence, was a curious restlessness; a restlessness which he had never known before. Some sort of urge; a dumb, incomprehensible desire to . . . he did not know what. There was no feeling of revolt. On the contrary, he loved to think of Ettie, and Orchard Leigh, and Hermione, and Gruff, and everybody, going on as usual. It was nice to have that mental anchorage . . . one's own place; one's own family, secure, happy, well-ordered, prosperous.

At the same time . . . this unaccountable sensation of . . . of escape. Yes, escape.

It'll be very jolly to see them all again day after tomorrow. This change is doing me a world of good. Brushing away the cobwebs. Silly to get so touchy just because people are kind and considerate. Fact is, I was getting a bit run down. P'r'aps Ettie's right. Overworked, and did n't notice it. Very likely.

Then he gave himself up wholeheartedly to the subtle enchantment of London. He made his way back to the Parisienne.

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I 'd like to see one of these cabaret shows, he kept telling himself.

These egg sandwiches 'll go moldy if I can't get rid of them, somehow, soon. . . . After all, it was very good of Ettie to think of it. . . . I might have been glad of them.

He went up to his room to dress for dinner, and as he went he hummed a snatch of nonsense from "Hold It Down:"

Never mind the rain—
No!
Let 's do it again!
Oh!
You 're my little Bower Bird, Billee—
So!
Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?

Very catchy, that last line:

So!
Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?

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III

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S NÉRÉDAH LEETA

YOU know those roundabouts that come to country fairs, with "ANDERSON'S LIFE-LIKE PEOPLE'S EQUESTRIAN RIDE AND GRAND MELODIOUS STEAM PIPE-ORGAN ACCOMPANIMENT" in gilt letters all round the top? They have polished, twisted brass rods transfixing the wooden horses, and each wooden horse has a scarlet mouth and a dappled body. In the center of the machine, round the Grand Melodious Steam Pipe-organ, stand little brazen figures—Spanish dancers and Tyrolese troubadours—holding drums, triangles, and cymbals; and when the steam is turned on these images move their arms and beat their instruments. And behind these, encased in gilt filigree, is the hexagonal mirror, whose looking-glass facets glitter confusedly. The flares, the giddy Equestrian Ride, the little clashing images, and the *Ump-pump-Pa! Ump-ump-Pom! Ump-Pa! Crash!* of the Melodious Accompaniment. Well, that's how London and the Hotel Parisienne seemed to Mr. Birtwistle. He was like a child on a roundabout.

After dinner Mr. Birtwistle smoked, loafed about, and suddenly made up his mind to go down to the Hotel Parisienne Cabaret Show—"The Fan-Tan Frolics"—at 11:30.

Go down and have a snack of supper, eh . . . and see the show. . . . Like to see a cabaret show.

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Sure enough, at the appointed hour, Mr. Birtwistle strolled (a little self-consciously) down to supper.

He was out to enjoy himself, and when the band struck up:

So! . . .
Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?

he could n't help beating time with one foot.

He liked to be in the midst of all this; he liked the light-hearted gaiety of it all—the women, the dresses, the galaxy of lights, the deep, beehive hum of conversation, the smiling faces, and the neat, well-groomed men.

Almost without knowing it he found himself staring at a rather pretty girl who was sitting two tables away from him. Then it dawned upon him with a shock that she was smiling at him, invitingly. Embarrassed, he looked away; but his gaze wandered back again to her. Yes—*plip!* she *was* smiling at him, most invitingly. He caught himself smiling back at her. She seemed to say, "Come over here!" with her eyes . . . Mr. Birtwistle felt himself blush behind the ears, and it made him feel uncomfortable. She smiled again. One simply could not just sit there like an unmannerly lout. He found himself standing up, hesitating; and he did not like to sit down again. People might look at him . . . grin at him. . . .

And now he was sitting down at her table! He was astonished at himself, and rather pleased.

"You look so very, very lonely all by yourself over there!" she laughed.

"H'er, yes, I . . . I was a bit . . . on my own," Mr. Birtwistle stammered, his heart all of a fan-tan frolic.

"And it 's so ridic', 'cos we might just as well sit at the same table. I hate being insular," she explained.

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Grape-fruit. Fizz. . . . Sipping iced champagne. As the band came again to that sobbing lilt:

So!

the girl hummed softly:

Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?

and caught his eye, and laughed. Mr. Birtwistle's heart went *plip!*

"It really is a wonderful tune," he said.

"Yes," the girl nodded, and hummed in unison with the music:

. . . mind the rain! Let's do it again!
Oh!* . . . Bower Bird, Billie— *So—!

And Birtwistle hummed with her:

Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?

"It 's a wonderful show, don't you think—'Hold It Down'?"

"Is n't it the summit! I 've been five times."

Awfully nice girl. Nice to have some one to talk to. Nice-looking, too. Long, creamy neck . . .

"I say, do help me consume some of this fizz!" She smiled her acceptance.

So nice of her not to mind an Old Josser like me butting in. . . . Can't be more than twenty-two. Getting on frightfully well together. No harm in it.

He thought her lips were extraordinarily small and red, like ripe cherries—Cherry Ripe. Wonder what her name is?

She caught him staring at her red lips, and flashed a

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sidelong glance at him. Birtwistle was not used to this sort of thing; it made him gasp inwardly.

And when she turned away, now and then, to look at some one, he saw she had a whole galaxy of crisp little waves of black hair clustering up and up and up from the clean, boyish-looking back of her beautiful white neck. Semi-shingled (he knew that) and permanently waved (he did not know the secret of those crisping clusters). He wanted to run his hand over them. It reminded him of graining—imitation oak—so rigidly unreal, so captivatingly counterfeit were these clinging, close-cut undulations. As a boy he had watched a painter graining the back door with a comb and bits of rag. Wonderful wobbling swirls and knots, he remembered. No, it was more like—just like—that wooden toy Bruin with a tinkling bell round its neck which came from some Swiss village. It had nice, crisp, concave curls rudely chipped out in cubist planes by some ingenious peasant.

Ah, but she was speaking again.

They talked of this and that. She asked him whether he had seen Nikoli Jakov in "Silk Pajamas" and, incidentally, how long he was staying at the Parisienne.

"Oh, I 'm going back to-morrow," said Mr. Birtwistle, and for a moment a mawkish qualm flooded him.

"But how sad!" she said, with her little dark head on one side.

"Oh, I shall be up again—next month, probably. I may have to come up before that."

"I could n't *bear* not to be in London."

"No?"

"One would feel so . . . so dreadfully derailed."

"Yes," said Birtwistle, "one does feel a bit sidetracked."

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"Shunted," said the girl, "sort of loop-line feeling. . . . Oh," she cried, "they 're going to play 'No, I never take rhubarb!' from 'What a Hope' at the Palace."

Everything was so jolly—people so jolly. Everything going to a gay rhythm. Fan-Tan Frolics. What 's this? "No, I never take rhubarb" . . . Spirit of carnival. Fizz. . . .

"Let 's smoke, shall we? George? Tell 'em to wheel some smokes round here, will you? Now what 'll you have? . . . Turkish? Egyptian . . . these look rather good . . . What, Virginia? Oh, all right."

There was something about this girl which roused the slumbering masculinity of Birtwistle.

She was dark, with dark eyes, and her neck poised and turned like . . . like the neck of a beautiful white swan; yes, like the neck of a white swan, so gracefully.

Ah, but it was not that. . . . She was Life, reckless, squandering Life. Mr. Birtwistle had never been reckless, had never squandered anything.

This girl was like— What was she like? Mr. Birtwistle's poetic imagination was inadequate. Like the bubbling trill of a thrush on a hedge all set with wild rosebuds; like a spider's web dew-pearled, spangling in the early morning sun. She was quivering with life. He responded to her in every fiber, and it disturbed him. It was something which had never happened to him before. It made him restless. It made him whistle snatches of song, and it cast him into depressions which were silly—he knew that—quite silly. This contagion of . . . of life and youth . . . it hurt, it exhilarated, it ruined his peace of mind; and he was not sure that it was quite . . . well . . . quite right. . . . Still, no real harm.

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She certainly looked very charming. Slim and boyish, with her long, creamy neck and her dark, semi-shingled hair. He liked the tiny scarlet mouth and the frequent gleam of white teeth. Great arching eyebrows; arched in perpetual interrogation, giving a "Well, what about it?" expression. He watched her with her cigarette, and a little thrill of delight almost frightened him when she moved her arms.

He leaned across to her.

"I say, *do* tell me your name?"

"Oh . . . I've got such lots of names."

"Well, do tell me."

"You'll never remember them all. Nérédah Leeta Escourt Fairjohn—there!" she laughed.

"I like those names—especially Leeta."

"My turn now," she said. "Tell me yours."

"Mine?" and immediately fear fell upon Mr. Birtwistle. It might not do . . . if . . . well, if people got to know . . . about this. They'd talk.

"Very ordinary name, mine," said Birtwistle, trying hard to invent one. Brown? No, too common. Harrison? Can't think of anything except Brown and Harrison. What other names are there?

"Christian name's Edward," he said at last.

"Oh, I love Teddy!"

"Edward Goodchild," said Birtwistle.

"But how perfectly innocent!"

"Yes—ha, ha!—Goodchild. Queer name, is n't it?"

"Priceless!"

Very good idea, that—Goodchild. Remember that—Edward Goodchild. Teddy. Better not to give my real name. One never knows. Things leak out. Quite innocent, harmless things.

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"Well, anyhow, Leeta, this is very jolly—all this."

He felt that diaphragmatic *plip!* again when he called her Leeta.

And when she said, "Teddy, *do* look at that girl in the green dress, dancing over there, 'd you *ever* see such legs?" he was giddily exhilarated.

Not even Godwin, now. Not Birtwistle. Different person altogether—Teddy. Leeta calls me "Teddy."

As the evening advanced things became more and more hilarious and more and more confused. Afterward "Teddy" was not sure whether he had actually danced with Leeta or not. . . . Fizz. There was some sort of breathless Apache dance in which the girl seemed to be flung upside down over the man's head and then dragged along the floor. Legs . . . and . . . "hardly anything on."

Mr. Birtwistle and Nérédah Leeta seemed to drift about amongst tables and people, balloons and music.

"Teddy," she said, "we really *must* meet again!"

"Of course we shall, Leeta . . . of course." She seemed to be very near to him. He wanted to put his arm round her supple little body, but he did not like to do it with all these people about.

He could not recall exactly where he had left her. Here he was, at last, in his own room, yawning but very, very pleased with life.

"Good Lord! Nearly two in the morning," he said aloud. . . . Very nice girl—Nérédah Leeta. Jolly girl. Refined. Nothing cheap or common about her. Passed the evening away as if we 'd known each other for years! Nice-looking, too.

But Mr. Birtwistle was unduly excited; it had been a tremendous adventure for him, and it left him fizzing.

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He was much too excited to get to bed. He sat in an armchair and smoked a pipe.

No doubt about it, she 's an awfully jolly girl. Full of life and fun. Makes you feel young to look at her.

He sat there with his legs sprawled out, his waistcoat undone, and his stiff shirt-front bulging.

Damn-pretty girl, too. Laughed like anything when I said, "Leeta, if I was n't a married man . . . I 'd . . ." "Now, Teddy, you be a Goodchild!" Ha, ha! Well, I don't know . . . Still, just harmless fun. Harmless fun. Don't suppose I 'll ever set eyes on her again.

But at that thought Mr. Birtwistle found himself unaccountably depressed.

Of course, I might happen to meet her . . . just possible. As for being *Old* Birtwistle, I 'm not that, anyhow. I 'm Teddy. For to-night, at any rate, I 'm Teddy. Fancy me being Teddy, with a Miss Nérédah Leeta Fairjohn at the Parisienne! Well, I 'd better turn in.

His mind went whirling on; he could not sleep. He fell into patches of dream. Badley came in and stared at him. "All right, Badley, this is a friend of mine—Leeta." "Mrs. Birtwistle 's sent me to ask if you 've 'ad your Ovaltine, sir?" Leeta screaming with laughter. Everyone standing up to look at him. "I don't want it, Badley! I don't want it!" "Sorry, sir, Mrs. Birtwistle 's sent a Monster Thermos full of 'ot milk an' she says—" he woke up in a ridiculous terror. After that he seemed to be floating in a gondola with Leeta, in the moonlight, and he was just about to kiss those small red lips when the whole Birtwistle family materialized looking over a very beautiful bridge, shouting: "Father! What *are* you doing? You have n't got your overcoat on!" It all faded away, and a magnum of champagne gradually took

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the shape of Miss Greenhalgh. "I 've put all the balloons on your desk, Mr. Birtwistle," she said; thereupon Dodd burst into the office, shouting, "His name is n't Birtwistle; it 's *Teddy!* How 'd you like your egg sandwiches, Teddy? Ha, ha, ha!"

From this fitful phantasmagoria he slipped into a heavy sleep.

The full consciousness of his harmless lapse from the rôle of father dawned upon Mr. Birtwistle late the following day when, his business in London concluded, the train carried him through the dwindling agricultural counties and the declining straw-plait industry, toward boots and shoes, cycles, bolts, nails, pins, and general hardware, past hosiery and lace, to the cutlery, coal, and iron of the North.

He sat staring through the window with his "Times," "Punch," a three-and-sixpenny detective story called "The Death-Ray Gang," and a copy of "Homes and Gardens" by his side.

Edward Goodchild . . . Teddy . . . Still, I s'pose there was no real harm in it?

The nearer the train took him toward Orchard Leigh the more heinous the lapse appeared.

One never knows where these things may lead. Nothing actually *wrong,* of course, but one has to be careful. I can't think, now, how I came to pick up with this girl Leeta. It 's not like me to . . . to do a thing like that. Quite a nice girl; not just a common . . . er . . . well, not a common girl at all. Refined. Still, one does n't just pick up with girls like that. Does n't do.

Yes, said another part of Mr. Birtwistle, but she 's

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young and quite pretty. Those arched eyebrows and the small, full, red lips . . . The lithe voluptuousness of her slim body, the white arms that seemed to ripple when she moved, and the half-shy, half-impudent sidelong glance . . . I liked that . . . I liked all that. I wanted to take her up and kiss her. I very nearly did.

Well, anyhow, said the steady-going Birtwistle, I did n't. I must admit I was . . . er . . . very much attracted to the girl, but that 's nothing; I mean one often *is* attracted—especially if it 's a good-looking girl. Same time, I rather wish I . . . had n't picked her up like that. I sha'n't go to the Parisienne again. . . . No. Better not. Far better not.

For the first time in his life Mr. Birtwistle discovered two conflicting personalities—a pagan Bacchanalian and a straitlaced Puritan—at war within him.

So! Would n't you like to Yucatan with me? sang the sportive satyr.

This is n't right, somehow. . . . Not like me, at all, said the respectable North-country manufacturer.

She 's a peach—this Nérédah Leeta—a perfect peāch! the satyric voice proclaimed.

Can't think how I could have dropped so low . . . picking up with strange girls at the Parisienne, said the local preacher.

She 's your little Bower Bird, Teddy! shouted the Imp of Youth.

No, no, this won't do at all. Won't do at all. It 's loose . . . not decent . . . married man . . . grown-up family . . . have to be more careful in future. And as Mr. Birtwistle came into the bleak grime of the manufacturing districts he looked back upon that night at the

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Hotel Parisienne almost with horror. To think that he should go on the loose like that! (True, no real harm—nothing at all immoral, but . . .)

He put his hand in his pocket. Those egg sandwiches! They seemed to reproach him; a crackly, grease-proof reproach. Hard as iron . . . all dried up.

He dropped the neat little packet out of the window and glanced across at the old gentleman at the other side of the compartment. The old gentleman had not noticed. What was it? "Not to throw out of the window anything likely to hurt men working on the line." They won't hurt.

Quite suddenly Birtwistle remembered the Monster Thermos still in his suit-case; still full of tea. What would Ettie say? Explanations. . . . No. He could not return to Orchard Leigh with the tea untouched. Must drink some of it—pour it away, or something. That Monster Thermos, full of tepid China tea (Ettie always got the very best China tea from Watkins because there was no tannin in China tea), seemed to be a silent incriminator. It gleamed accusingly.

He took it from his suit-case, unscrewed it, poured the luke-warm tea into the screw-top cup, took a sip, shuddered; poured it back. While he was wondering what to do about this he bethought himself of the unopened Ovaltine! "But Godwin, you *never* took your Ovaltine!"

Never ought to 've gone to the damn Hotel Parisienne. Hate the idea of this . . . this subterfuge.

It did not seem straightforward to drop the sandwiches out of the window, pour the tea away, and . . . well, what *was* to be done about the new tin of Ovaltine? He could almost feel Ettie's presence watching him reproachfully.

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Just say, "My dear, I did n't want any Ovaltine, so I did n't take any." But that, he knew, would lead to long-drawn-out reproofs and exhortations.

"And I chucked the egg sandwiches out of the window on the way home . . ." I can't say that, anyhow. Wish I had n't thrown them out.

In the end, as the train drew nearer and nearer his destination, subterfuge overcame that simple honesty of purpose which had always guided Mr. Birtwistle throughout his marital and mercantile career.

He took his old penknife from his trousers pocket, ripped round the edge of the Ovaltine tin, emptied what he calculated to be three or four large teaspoonfuls into the paper jacket of the detective story, screwed it up tightly, whisked it deftly under the seat, replaced the tin lid, and looked defiantly at the old gentleman. The old gentleman took no notice. There remained the tea. Mr. Birtwistle rose, opened the sliding door almost furtively, and made his way along the corridor. He was back in a few moments with an empty Thermos.

Birtwistle felt relieved, and yet half ashamed of himself.

After all, said his conscience, no real harm done. No good making a mountain out of a mole-hill. . . . Don't suppose I shall see the girl again as long as I live.

One can't be too careful.

"Well, dear, have you had a very tiring time?"

"Er, well, not too bad. No, not too bad."

"I 'm sure you're fagged out after all those hours in the train—"

"Oh, well, just a bit." (Yes, as a matter of fact I *do* feel a bit weary; get so cramped up sitting still).

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"Were you comfortable?"

"Oh, perfectly. Yes, quite."

"My dear," said Ettie when she had taken his hat and coat and scarf and sat him down in his armchair, "what sort of a place is the Hotel Parisienne?"

"Oh, not too bad. Quite all right."

"Because I saw something in the "Tatler" about a cabaret show."

"Yes, I believe they do go in for some sort of a cabaret show there."

"But, Daddy, did n't you want to go and see it?"

"Er, well . . ."

"My dear, don't be so silly," said Ettie. "Decent people don't go to these night clubs. D' you think it 's the sort of place to stay, Godwin? I mean, is n't it the sort of place where actors and actresses—"

"To tell you the truth, Ettie, I can't say I 'm exactly struck with the Parisienne. It 's a bit too . . . too showy and flighty for me. I made up my mind coming back in the train not to stay at the Parisienne again. Too noisy—all on the go. One can't concentrate. I shall stay at the Euston Court next time. One can think there without all the fuss and chatter; and, besides, they know me at the Euston Court."

"You have n't to go up again?"

" 'Fraid so, my dear. I may have to go up next week. I 'm not sure yet."

"Did you do anything exciting, Daddy?"

"Exciting? M-no . . . nothing really exciting. Saw a lot of people."

"Hermione seems to think London 's a sort of show, where one ought to spend one's time going to theaters and dances and buying things in Bond Street."

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"Well, fact is, my dear, Dodd and the rest of them did succeed in dragging me to a . . . a theater."

"Oh, Daddy! How *frightfully* exciting! And you said nothing exciting had happened! *Do* tell us about it! What was it?"

"Well, I do think it was thoughtless of them. I told Mr. Dodd not to keep you up after the long train journey; and then they go and drag you out late at night to a theater! It is too bad of them. It 's too much for you, Godwin."

"Oo, I dunno . . . once in a way . . ."

"Daddy, do tell us all about it."

"Well, fact is, Dodd and Pertwee and this new fellow Cossett, insisted on going to the Palladium."

"Oh, Daddy! 'Hold It Down?' How ripping!"

"M-m, one of these revues, you know—"

"How ridiculous, Godwin!" said Mrs. Birtwistle.

"Still, one had to fall in with their plans, and . . . and be a bit sociable."

"But Kitty Ponce declares it 's awfully good—the best show in town," said Hermione. "Was it good, Daddy?"

"M-m, well . . . not too bad, you know. Rather silly in parts, I thought. Lot of dancing and all that sort of thing."

"And I s'pose you did n't get out till past eleven, or some such unearthly hour?"

"Were a bit late, but I enjoyed it. All the same, I should n't want to see another revue. Not quite in my line."

"What were the songs, Daddy? Were there any good ones? *Do* try to remember."

"Songs? See now . . . The only catchy one was

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'Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?' Very catchy tune—"

"But, my dear, how vulgar!" exclaimed Ettie.

"Vulgar? No . . . is it?" said Birtwistle, rather startled.

"Well, you know what it means, don't you? I suppose some half-naked girl sang it."

"Yes, come to think of it, she had n't much on."

"But, Daddy, do hum it! What is the tune?"

"M-m, p'r'aps it is a little . . . er . . . common, my dear. I had n't noticed it. I must say some of the jokes were very near the mark—very near."

"You did n't forget to take your Ovaltine each evening, did you?"

"I did n't seem to want it . . . er . . . I did n't take very much . . . just a little." (Damn! I wish I 'd never opened the tin!)

"Well," he said, "it 's good to be home again. Now tell me all about what you 've been doing. How 's Gruff behaved himself? Badley bring up those new cells for the wireless I ordered?"

An incurable youthfulness was creeping over Mr. Birtwistle; a youthfulness which put the Orchard Leigh rhythm out of time. He had to force himself to feel tired and burdened with weighty business responsibilities. He caught himself whistling in the bath-room *"So! Would n't you like to Yuca—'"* and stopped. His little trip to London seemed to have done him good.

Nérédah Leeta faded from his mind. His conscience, sorely stricken on the homeward train journey, ceased to trouble him. He was more cheerful. Things seemed fresh and interesting. The oppressive feeling had van-

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ished, and he no longer resented the Kindliness and Consideration.

"Let 's get old Ponce in, and have a game of bridge, shall we?" he suggested.

"My dear, we shall never get rid of him; you know what he 's like once he starts. It 'll be one in the morning before we get him out of the house."

"Oh, never mind—once in a way. Come on."

"Well, of course, if you feel it won't be too much . . . I thought you said you had to meet Mr. Whibley to-morrow morning at ten-thirty, and—"

"M-m, p'r'aps you 're right."

"I 'm sure you ought to go to bed early."

All the same, Mr. Birtwistle felt he had made a bold move in suggesting such a thing.

"My dear," said Mr. Birtwistle, "you look awfully nice in that blue and gray thing you 're wearing."

"Don't be so silly, Godwin; it 's as old as the hills! I 've had it over a year."

Ettie could not understand what had come over Godwin. As a rule he never mentioned dress, never made any sort of comment upon her appearance, and she was astonished—shocked, almost—to hear such a remark.

"Going up to London seems to have done Father good," said Dot, when she called in one afternoon to see her mother.

"My dear, he was tired out when he got back. They dragged him about to theaters and places, and kept him up late at night—board meetings all day. Much too much for him."

"I thought he seemed very fit and cheerful."

"Of course he is, now that he 's got through with all those tiresome agreements and things. Besides, we 've

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made him take things easy and look after himself. Now his mind 's at rest about the Northern Steel business he 's much more himself. But he 's got to go up to London again on Wednesday. Goodness knows how he 'll be able to stand the strain of these long train journeys every week or so! It 's too much for anyone."

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IV

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S *LIBIDO*

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S next visit to London found him alone in his first-class compartment. Dodd, it seemed, could not get away; and in any case it was really only necessary for one of them to attend the board meeting.

Yes . . . better stay at the Euston Court. Far better. They know me at the Euston Court.

He settled himself to read. "The situation which has arisen in Latvia during the past few months owing to the intrigues of Rokhov the Soviet Commissar for—" Yes, I 'd better stay at the Euston Court. Not so distracting.

"Responding to the toast of 'The Ministry of Transport (Road Dept.)' Sir Herbert Tighe said that local authorities had been faced with grave anxieties since the war. He believed they had weathered the storm and that—" Still, I must say I rather enjoyed the Parisienne. So cheery.

"A general lock-out, affecting 7,000 workers in the chemical industry at Munich—" and I don't suppose she 's likely to be there again. No. Most unlikely. Still, p'r'aps I 'd better go to the Euston Court. I told Ettie I 'd be staying there. Mm . . .

"The Air Minister, Sir Wilbur Mitcham-Jolfe, will attend a meeting to-night at Glasgow at which he will ex-

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plain the—" Of course, they know me at the Euston Court. I 've always stayed there before. Stayed there in nineteen-twenty. Some time ago, though, now. And Mr. Ponce says Albert the head waiter 's gone. Left last year. They might not remember me. And that nice rosy-cheeked chambermaid, who used to put a hot-water bottle in my bed for me—I daresay she 's gone, too. I should n't know anyone.

Then, again, they know me at the Parisienne. They 'll remember my staying there only last week—sure to. I liked the food better, too. The Euston Court 's quite all right, of course—quite all right. But not the same. More life and go at the Parisienne. More in the heart of things. I 'd be nearer the Northern Steel Office at Norvic House at the Parisienne—much nearer. Only a few minutes' walk.

No real reason why I should n't stay at the Parisienne. If it comes to that, I can have my meals sent up to my room. And, anyhow, is it likely I 'd run into her again? London 's a big place. She won't be there. On the whole, I don't see why I should n't stay at the Parisienne.

The Euston Court 's so gloomy, with the gloomy old railway station near by. I prefer the Parisienne in Piccadilly. And I liked the way the place was run, and the rooms. I 'd feel a bit out of the way at the Euston Court. The people are different, too.

At last the train ran into the London terminus, and Birtwistle had to make up his mind.

"Luggage, sir? Taxi?"

"Er . . . yes, taxi."

"Right, sir."

After all I don't think I will go to the Euston Court.

"Where for, sir?"

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"Er . . . yes, Hotel Parisienne."

"'Otel Prizzy-yen," said the porter to the taxi-man.

Birtwistle looked out as he sped past the Euston Court. Gloomy. Makes me feel old, somehow. Quite nice inside, I know; but . . . well, anyhow . . . I've decided.

A disturbing expectancy bubbled in his heart. Ach, it's all right; she won't be there, he kept telling himself. Externally he was the heavy business man, the prosperous manufacturer; but within he was all dithery, exultant, like a school-boy on the spree. London seemed to intoxicate him. Anything might happen.

At the Parisienne he was recognized and welcomed.

"I stayed here last week, with Mr. Dodd and Mr. Pertwee."

"Oh, what name, sir?"

"Birtwistle, Mr. Birtwistle—Godwin Birtwistle."

"Oh yes, or course, Mr. Birtwistle. You can have the same room—Number forty three, sir—if that suits you?"

"That's fine," said Birtwistle.

Everything went swimmingly. He went off to Norvic House, met two representatives of certain shipping-firms, talked over a report on freights, and then returned to his hotel toward evening. As he made his way back from Norvic House, walking leisurely down Piccadilly, he noticed a little ivory bracelet, with a tiny black elephant running round its rim, hanging with a number of other bangles, bracelets, and fandangles in a jeweler's shop.

Just what Hermione wants! George gave Camilla one for her birthday, and Hermione's wanted one ever since. I'll go in and get it for her.

He did. He came out of the shop glad to think that he would have a little present for Hermione when he got

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back, and to find that Orchard Leigh had not entirely faded from his mind.

Having returned to his room at the Parisienne, he went through some papers, made notes, and rang for a whisky and soda.

"Will you be down to dinner, sir, or will you have it sent up to you?"

"Well, I don't know. . . . No, I'll come down."

"Very good, sir."

Hurriedly, excitedly, Birtwistle dressed for dinner, although there was no hurry and no cause for excitement. Then he strolled down to the grill-room, contented, at one with all men, and inexplicably elated.

He stood looking round upon the tables, the people, the gleam of glass, sliver, and cutlery . . .

"One, sir?"

Damn it, there she is! *Plip!*

There she was. Nérédah Leeta Escourt Fairjorhn dressed in a haze of gold lace trembling over a crêpe de Chine foundation, belt and inserted godets of georgette; pale sea-green—a sea-nymph tightly sheathed in sheening gold. She was smiling at him. Quite irresistible. Arched eyebrows. He went over to her.

"Hullo, Teddy! Come and sit here. This *is* nice!" she said.

"Delightful," said Teddy, "I . . . I wondered whether you 'd be here—"

"Oh, I just adore the Parisienne."

It was perfectly splendid to be "Teddy" again. Great fun. Like charades; playing charades, tête-à-tête, with a very pretty girl—with Nérédah Leeta. And no one knows I 'm Birtwistle. I 'm not, I 'm Teddy.

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"You look . . . quite perfect this evening," he said, "in that shimmery thing."

"D 'you like it? It is rather nifty, is n't it?"

"Quite lovely . . . sort of mermaid effect."

She laughed. The tiny, full, puckered-up scarlet lips unfolded, and the small white teeth flashed. All the rest of her was a blur. He saw nothing but that cupid's bow, and the great arched eyebrows.

She kept the conversation rippling. She rippled about everything and nothing, most enchantingly.

"I feel as if I 've known you for years," said Birtwistle.

"Oh, Mr. Goodchild!" she laughed.

"I do, really."

"But how stimulating!"

"You . . . you do stimulate. Elixir of Youth."

"Don't shout, Teddy. Every one 'll hear you."

Teddy felt he was galloping too quickly, and yet the wings of Pegasus swept him on and up toward Helicon.

This second meeting with Leeta was . . . unexpected. Was it? Well, anyhow, here we are.

There were no mawky interruptions from his conscience this time. It did not prick him at all. He never mentioned Orchard Leigh—indeed, he never gave it a thought —nor his business; and Leeta never asked any awkward questions.

"I say, where d' you live, Leeta?"

"I? I don't live, exactly; I simply endure."

"I say, Leeta, what 're you doing this evening?"

"Oh, I 'm just languishing like a Lenten lily. Why?"

"What about a show?"

"Not keen on a show to-night. Let 's just loiter, shall we, d' you mind?"

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"No; splendid; just what I 'd like. Only where shall we go?"

"Oh, let 's stroll around, if it 's a nice evening, any old where."

"Right you are."

London and Leeta and loitering . . .

They loitered out of the revolving doors of the Parisienne, into that mysterious, half dignified, half idiotic chimera of lights and noises and buildings swamped in gloom, which is London after dark. They crossed Piccadilly Circus in the direction of Shaftesbury Avenue, and—*plip!*—he was glad of the chance to take hold of her firm little arm and guide her through the maze of throbbing motor-buses, taxis, and the press of people. Near the Pavilion some one in a two-seater waved. "Hallo, Leeta!" A sallow young man with a tiny mustache, and a cigarette. She waved back. For the millionth part of a second it annoyed Teddy.

"Friend of yours?" he asked.

"Efty."

"Eh?"

"Efty-boy. It 's his name: F. T. Dowell. Quite a nice child."

He put his hand in his overcoat pocket. The little bracelet! A sudden impulse to give it to Leeta overcame him. He forgot all about Hermione. Hermione never even entered his head. It seemed to him that he had originally bought it for Leeta.

"Leeta," he said, "would you like a little present? I bought a little present for you to-day—"

"Would I not!"

"Really?"

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"Well, of co-o-course I would! You 're not to tease me, Teddy, I 'm like the animals at the Zoo."

He was so excited by the idea of giving it to Leeta that he must needs take it from his pocket and present it to her then and there. It was packed in a small box. Fumblingly he unpacked the bracelet and handed it to her, with a heart brimful of bird-song and star-dust caught up in a whirl of nebular nonsense. . . . *Nérédah-diddle-dee-Yucatan! Ivory-elephant-Lee-ta!*

('Fraid all this Northern Steel business 'll mean going up to London a good deal.)

"How sweet! Is n't it too absolutely *le dernier cri?*"

"Like it?"

"Ravishing! But Teddy," she smiled at him, "I can't thank you properly here—"

"Oh, that 's all right."

"But that 's not the right reply, at all!" she laughed.

"Is n't it?"

"Not a bit. When we get into a nice dark pool of shadowy shadow, I 'll show you—"

Plip! patter-patter-patter-patter-patter-patter . . . Yucatan with me! diddle-dee-dee! Mr. B. on the spree.

"I 'd be awfully lonely to-night if I had n't met you," he said.

"Well, I 'm glad, too."

"Really? You really mean that, Leeta?"

"Of co-o-ourse I do."

Funny how your arm seems to, sort of, s-slip round a waist, on its own.

"But you know heaps of people here, in London," he said.

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"Ye-es, but . . . they're not much use."

"No? Why?"

"Oh, life just is n't a bit easy."

"What d' you mean exactly?"

"Oh, nothing. I 'm all right, really. . . . I was contemplating . . ."

"What?"

"How to make my escape from . . . all this. Only then I 'd be left absolutely bereft of . . . of wherewithal; and one simply *must* exist."

"But . . . but you 're not short of money? I mean you . . . you . . . don't have to work, do you?"

"I have had to, and I may have to again. Oh, money 's a curse, Teddy."

"Good Lord! . . . one does n't realize . . . M-m."

"I say, let 's go toward the Embankment and look at the river. I love it when the lights wabble all wiggly-woggly. So deliciously suicidal, somehow. Don't let 's talk about money."

Slim and small and boyish, she looked, in her long coat with its great roll of kinkajou circling her neck.

That evening with Leeta in London ran into a beautiful anarchy against a mulberry mirk hanging over the streets, with the blaze of street lights on the pavements deflected upwards against the mulberry mirk. Everywhere illuminated signs blinked and went out, blinked and went out.

"I do love my li'le black elephant, Teddy."

They came at last to the river and the ribbons of yellow and white and pale violet reflections quietly rimpling and folding, folding and rimpling, broken only by black barge-shapes.

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"Don't they look as if they 've just been pasted on—those barges?" she said.

"Eh? . . . Oh, yes, pasted on. Yes . . . you ought to have been an artist, Leeta; you 've got an eye for these things."

Mulberry mirk, ribbons of light, barge-shapes . . . and Leeta close to him. The kinkajou brushed against his face, like thistledown, like the wisping of a fairy's wing. Elf-struck. It all ran into foolishness and beauty; and out of that farrago of bubbling joyfulness in Teddy's heart, mixed up with trams and lamp-posts and the watery wurgle of the river lip-lop-lapping against the stonework below, something happened which . . . which was like the sudden whirling flare of a catherine wheel on a foggy fifth of November.

A tram went roaring and rocking toward Blackfriars. A group of people passed. Fractured conversation hung for a moment and went out—"termorrer, so I tole dim if 'e,"—"never said one word about it, and never even—"

Then it happened. She simply stopped in a pool of deep shadow and pulled his face down to hers, as a child might pull down the branch of a tree. Then she kissed him. It was like being kissed by an invisible being, because he could not see her face, and his eyes would not leave a bending triangle of ripple in the water that kept undoing itself and coming together. He felt the shape of those full lips, and his senses reeled because the touch was . . . scarlet . . . puckered up like a rosebud . . . warm and moist.

"There!" she cried softly.

"Leeta!"

He took her in his arms and she did not resist. She yielded and molded limply to his embrace.

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"Leeta, darling," he whispered.

"Teddy, darling."

At once Mr. Birtwistle of Orchard Leigh returned to his physical body and came into conflict with his own *libido* which seemed to be enjoying itself outrageously.

This won't do. No, no, this won't do. Better get out of this.

Panic! Get away . . . say good night . . . get away. Now don't get excited. It's quite all right. Simply kissed the poor girl—that's all. No harm in a kiss, is there? Done it thousands of times under the mistletoe. Nothing in it.

Better get away. This might get very awkward, you know. Very awkward indeed.

Can't just walk off, can I? Besides, what harm have I done? Very nice girl, indeed. Quite a nice girl. Wearing the bracelet I gave her.

"Penny for them, Teddy?"

"Eh? Oh . . . just thinking."

"About—?"

"About you, of course."

"But how intriguing!"

"Ha! . . . er . . . yes, very . . . yes."

"I think we're getting to know each other *awf*'ly well," she laughed.

"Yes, are n't we?"

"You did n't *mind* my kissing you, did you, Teddy?"

"Me? Oo, rather not! No, of course not. Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered . . . 'cos I won't do it any more, ever again, if you *rea*lly object," she teased.

"Oh, but *I* shall!"

"Naughty, naughty, bad Mr. Goodchild!"

"I'm beginning to think I am—a bit . . . well . . .

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unconventional. Still I s'pose it does n't matter very much."

"How could it?"

"Exactly. How could it?"

"One can only be young once, Teddy. What 's the good of bothering?"

"No good at all!"

"So . . . so you won't just repent and . . . and leave me all forlorn like one of those poor li'le milkmaids in the old ballads?"

"Leave you? Well, of course, I 've got to go back to the North, midday to-morrow, but, we 're sure to meet again."

"Are we?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Oh, I 'm a silly kid, Teddy; I just wondered."

"What?"

"You might say t' yourself, 'This won't do. I'd better not see her again.' Some men are like that, you know."

"You don't think I 'd do a thing like that?"

"Sorry, Teddy, I just was n't absolutely certain. It 's so easy to forget . . . and I 've got no *real* friends, Teddy."

"It 's not so easy to forget you, Leeta."

"N-no?"

"You 're like a ray of sunshine. I . . . I . . . should be most unhappy if I thought I should n't see you again."

"But how romantic!"

"It is . . ."

"Ha! you 're just a great grown-up kid, Teddy; that 's all."

"I used to imagine I was old. Not so long ago, either. Just an old fogey."

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"But how delightfully antediluvian!"

"Got into a rut, you know. So easy to do that."

"You 're just a kid, Teddy—a dear old kid."

She looked up to him with her enchanting sidelong glance. A bright splash of lamplight slid all down her nose and lips, and dimpled in her chin. He saw the long shadows of her eyelashes move across her pink cheeks. The sort of pink you see in roses hand-painted on delicate tea-cups; pink roses and blue ribbons and pale yellow basketwork. That sort of pink; a little unreal, a hint of theatricality, but captivating, ravishing, enrapturing because of it.

Wonderful girl. I s'pose it 's quite all right, really. Yes. I don't care if it is n't. Sha'n't do anything silly —why should I?

"I do just adore my li'le black elephant, Teddy."

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V

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S SURPRISING CONTRITION

I SHALL regret this when I get home, Mr. Birtwistle's conscience kept saying; all very well, but when I get back to Orchard Leigh I 'm bound to regret it. Bound to.

He expected to be whipped severely by his conscience, but, curiously enough, not until he reached the green-gray, slated gables, the white rough-cast, and the apple-green paintwork of his own home in the North.

Next day he attended a board meeting at Norvic House in the morning and caught the midday train from Euston. Before leaving London, however, he made a purchase at a shop in the West End called "Clotilde."

There were three dresses displayed in the window, and one very cheeky-piquey little hat with a jab of orange cockading cockatooishly up one side. It was not the hat which attracted him; it was an evening dress of some sort of silvery flummux spangling over a sheeny-greeny electric blue.

Rather a nice dress, that. Then he walked on. He wondered whether he would send Ettie a wire to say what time he would be arriving, so that Badley should be at the station to meet him. Ettie always liked to know exactly what train he was on and when it was due. P'r'aps it does n't matter, though.

See . . . to-morrow 's the 3d of November. Yes, by

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Jove, that's the anniversary of our wedding-day! I forgot all about it last year, and the year before . . . and the year before that. H'm, one does forget things. Married how many years? Blest if I remember.

Get something, eh? Surprise. Surprise for Ettie. Good idea! Dammit, I'll go back and get that dress. Silver and blue. She'd look awfully well in that.

He turned about, hurrying along until he came again to the tasteful and dignified window display of "Clotilde."

"Er . . . you've got a dress in the window," he began.

"Yes," said the girl. "Which one?"

"The one with the silvery stuff."

"Oh, yes—a very pretty model especially designed for us."

"How much is it?"

"That model is twenty-seven guineas, sir."

"Well, I'll take it," said Birtwistle.

"Er . . . can we send it for you . . . to . . . ?"

"No, I'll take it and pay for it now."

"Oh, very well, sir, just a minute."

The manageress was called. Evidently the procedure was not quite usual.

"Yes, I want to take it with me," said Birtwistle. "I'll give you a check for it now. If you want references you can—"

"Oh, that's quate all raight. Ae'll have it pecked up for you et once. Perheps you'll let us have yah address. It's quate all raight."

He gave his card.

"Yah shah you would n't lake us to send it on fah yah?"

"No, thanks, I'll take it with me. I want it," he said desperately.

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"Oh, very well, sir. If it should not fit modam, we would of course make any alterations necessarah. It 's a wonderfully *chic* model which hes been specially desaigned for us in Paris by one of the—"

"Yes," said Birtwistle, "I like it."

Mr. Birtwistle emerged with a cumbersome but extraordinarily light, cardboard box, across which sprawled the name "Clotilde." He found it difficult to carry, and he felt suddenly foolish walking about with a costumier's dress-box under one arm. He called a taxi and proceeded in comfort to Euston.

Glad I thought of that. Anniversary of our wedding-day. Nice idea, rather.

He conjured up a vision of Ettie wearing the *chic* model and he heard himself say, "My dear, you look *aw*fully nice in it!" He wanted to say that. He saw her standing in the drawing-room at Orchard Leigh against the ebony gleam of the grand piano. It was difficult to see her plainly—one had such a very vague idea of what Ettie looked like. Lived with her for—how many years?—and yet I can't quite recall her features. Gray hair with strands of silver running throught it; a pale face and two large, wide-open, wondering eyes—very, very blue eyes. Hermione has them too. Oh, yes, and the mouth—rather small and curiously depressed at each corner. Altogether, a pleasant face; a little too anxious in expression, perhaps. . . . Just a little anxious and concerned lest she might have forgotten to let the dog out, or tell Badley he need n't call at the International Stores.

Funny how one gets into a rut and forgets birthdays and wedding-days and all those things. She will . . . she 'll look splendid in it. It 'll suit her.

He found himself making up a conversation.

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"Ettie, d'you know what to-morrow is?" "No, Godwin, what is it?" "Why, it's the anniversary of our wedding-day!" "So it is, yes." "Oh, I did n't forget it, I 've got a surprise for you." "For *me?*" "Yes; you 'll never guess. . . ."

Poor old Ettie! She can't have had much of a life of it, these last few years anyhow. Monotonous, dull, housekeeping sort of existence. How she puts up with it I don't know. Same old thing every day. It 'll cheer her up. Besides, I like giving people presents.

Presents: I seem to be going in for presents—ivory bracelet for . . . er . . . for Leeta. I do *wish* there had n't been any . . . er . . . any of this . . . er . . . well, kissing business. Upsets it all, somehow. And I 'm bound to regret it when I get back. No need for it. Why could n't we just . . . just be good pals? Still, I don't know. No harm in a kiss, is there? No *real* harm. I mean it 's not immoral, or anything like that. All the same, I don't like it—don't like the idea of it. Not straight. I shall feel I 've got something to hide . . . from Ettie. One does these silly things without thinking, on the spur of the moment.

Anyway, I did n't start it. She simply flung her arm round my neck and . . . and did it! What could any man do? One can't be rude. . . .

If I do ever see her again I shall say, "Look here Leeta—no kissing. After all, I 'm a married man, and . . . it might complicate everything."

Why on earth did I ever get friendly with the girl? "I do just adore my li'l black elephant." She 's most attractive. Especially when she puts her head on one side and says, "But how intriguing, Teddy!"

That 's another thing I don't like, this double-name

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business. She thinks I 'm Mr. Edward Goodchild. I hate it, it 's shifty. But p'r'aps it 's wise. It would n't do at all if . . . well, if any of this leaked out. Not that I 've done anything wrong—I have n't—but people would *make* it wrong. They 'd twist it.

There 's no doubt I shall regret this when I see Ettie and Hermione and every one this evening.

("Naughty, naughty, bad Mr. Goodchild!")

Two square pillars of white rough-cast supported the portico at the entrance to Orchard Leigh. An oblong of apple-green paint with two little squares of leaded glass, each pane bottled and bulging, was the front door. Overhead, depending from the portico, a neat bulb of white alabaster flooded the steps and sparkled on the bottled panes. Mr. Birtwistle came up those steps with a firmer step and a springier stride than usual. He could hear Gruff barking in his apple-green kennel at the back of the house. Good old Gruff. This really is a very jolly place of mine, this Orchard Leigh; so homely and yet so dignified, so tasteful and yet so unostentatiously artistic. Modern, but not outrageous; nothing that offends one's sense of real homeliness and the peace of England's countryside. An Englishman's home . . . castle.

"Oh, *there* you are! You 're back at last," said Ettie, hurrying from the drawing-room. "You *must* be so tired, poor dear—" but before the *pp!* could reach his cheek, Mr. Birtwistle took his wife round the waist and kissed her full-lipped upon the mouth. She gasped.

"Godwin! *Don't* be so silly! The servants . . ."

"Oh, damn the servants! How 's Ettie? How 's Hermione? How 's Gruff? How 's everybody since yesterday morning?"

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Now none of this was included in the Book of the Words of the Orchard Leigh Cult, and Ettie felt as a prompter feels when the chief actor starts gagging; one never knows where it will end.

"What's this cardboard box you've got marked 'Clotilde,' Godwin?" (Oh, hang it! I meant to hide that before anyone—)

"Er . . . ah . . . it's . . . a pair of . . . of trousers, my dear."

"*Trou*sers, Godwin?"

"Er . . . more or less. Never mind now. I'll show you later on. Where's Hermione?"

"She's gone to tea with the Ponces, and I expect she's stayed on. She'll be in any minute now."

"Well, I'll just get clean," said Godwin, striding up the stairs with the cardboard box under his arm.

"You'll find a clean towel put out ready—"

"Oh, that's good. Right-o! Down soon."

But none of this was quite—well, not quite like Godwin, somehow or other. Fancy kissing me like that! He never does that. He must be a little overwrought, what with all the rush and worry of London and the board meetings.

"My dear," said Godwin when he had sat himself down in his arm-chair, "come here. Come over here."

"But what for, Godwin?"

"I want to tell you something—surprise."

"Don't say you've to go up again next week?"

"No . . . no, not next week; the week after. I say . . . ?"

"Yes; well, what is it, Godwin, what's happened?"

"D' you know what to-morrow is?"

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"To-morrow? Friday, of course. Godwin, what is it? What are you smiling about?"

"I mean—what 's the date?"

"It 's the third of November, and it 's the anniversary of our wedding-day."

"You had n't forgotten it?"

"Of course not. But why? What 's the matter?"

"Well, I remembered it, quite suddenly, in London."

"Well?"

"Well, I 've got a surprise."

"I don't understand."

"You go up to your room and you 'll find it there!"

"But . . . but what have you done?"

"I have n't done anything; it 's a surprise for you."

"In my bedroom?"

"Yes, on the bed."

"But, who put it there?"

"I did—just now."

"Godwin, you 're being so . . . so strange to-night. Are you really quite well? You don't seem like yourself . . . quite."

"I 'm all right, my dear. You go up and see."

"But what *is* it, Godwin?"

"Ah, that 's a secret, till you unpack it."

"But why—I mean what 's it for?"

"It 's for you, my dear."

"It 's some sort of . . . joke?"

"No, no, no; you go up and see what I 've brought for you."

"But why can't you tell me?"

"It 's a surprise, Ettie."

"But it 's so queer of you."

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"No, it is n't."

"I can't make it out."

"It 's to commemorate the anniversary of our wedding-day."

"But . . . but we never do; I mean . . . commemorate. You 've never done this before, Godwin."

"No, but I have this time. Do go up and see it."

"It 's not alive, is it? Godwin, it 's not anything creepy?"

"No, no, no! . . . It 's a present."

"In that cardboard box?"

"In that cardboard box; yes."

"But you said it was trousers!"

"Er . . . well, it is n't. That was a blind. I was pulling your leg."

"Godwin, it is a joke. You 're playing a practical joke on me. It 's so strange of you to—"

"Now just go up like a good girl . . . and see . . . what 's on . . . your bed," he pushed her gently toward the door. She went up at last.

He stood behind the drawing-room door, listening. Then he heard her open the bedroom door; heard the box-lid fall on the carpet; heard the fuzzle of tissue paper; a moment of dead silence ending in a tiny scream. He was so excited about it that he could not stop in the drawing-room. He went into the hall and called out:

"How d' you like it, Ettie?"

"It 's simply lovely, Godwin!"

"Put it on, then, and let 's see you in it."

"All right, I will."

It was a great success. By a piece of amazing luck it fitted. When she came down dressed in the silvery flummux spangling over the sheeny-greeny electric blue, he

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made her stand over against the dark triangle of the grand piano. "Just to please me, Ettie."

"But it 's so silly."

"No, it is n't; it 's how I pictured you—against the piano. You 're splendid in it, Ettie."

"But it was frightfully expensive, Godwin?"

"Now turn round. Yes, you look really wonderful in it. D' you like it?"

"I do, I think it 's lovely, Godwin, but you really ought not to buy such expensive presents. Besides . . . I 'm too old to . . . to want pretty dresses."

"Oh, bosh! That 's all rot! We 're *not* old, Ettie. Come and give me a kiss—" but just then Hermione came in.

"Hullo! Come and see the mannequin parade. What-joo think of that, eh? Very pretty model specially designed for Orchard Leigh—"

"Godwin, *don't* be so silly! What *is* the matter with you this evening?"

"I say, Mother! It 's awfully nice! Did Daddy bring it from London?"

"From 'Clotilde,' my dear, in the West End. All the latest things from Paris—"

"I 'm green with envy!" cried Hermione. "Do let me see the back of it, Mother."

"It 's the umpteenth anniversary of our wedding-day to-morrow, Hermione."

"It is a lovely present, Daddy! Don't you love it, Mother?"

"I do, dear, but think what it must have *cost*—"

"Oh, blow the cost! You look perfect in it, Ettie; that 's all that matters."

She went over to him and gave him a little *pp!* on the

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cheek; she was pleased and bewildered, and completely taken by surprise; she did not know how to respond—what to say, or do.

"It 's very good of you, Godwin, but it 's much too nice for me," she faltered.

"Mother, does it do up at the back? Is n't it beautifully cut at the side? You are lucky, Mother!"

In some dim, subconscious way Mr. Birtwistle knew that he was making amends for something.

Oh, Lord, 'nother button off these pajamas. But nothing could deject Mr. Birtwistle. He found himself singing at the top of his voice:

"I 'd like to phone her
In Barcelona—"

Then he heard Ettie calling to him from her room, along the passage, "Did you call, Godwin?"

"No, 's all right. . . . Quite all right."

"I 'm sure I heard some one—"

"Only me singin', my dear."

Birtwistle kicked off his woolly bedroom slippers and plunged the room into darkness.

Darkness . . . ice-cold pillow-case . . . the bellying *bolloph!* of the scalding hot-water bottle. I ought to feel dejected. I ought to feel . . . ashamed of myself, and I don't . . . *bolly-wolloph*—so hot you can't touch the damn thing—not in the least. It was wrong—not wicked, perhaps—but wrong. . . .

His conscience kept on talking, but Birtwistle could not squeeze out any moral response. A hitch somewhere behind the scenes. He had expected the—

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SAFETY CURTAIN

to come down smoothly and slowly upon this lapse from . . . er . . . from, well, from what one knows to be right. Instead, he felt unaccountably pleased with things and with life in general. He had fully expected to experience a sense of shame; some sort of repentance for having . . . ah . . . got himself kissed by . . . by Leeta . . . this girl Leeta . . . in a pool of deep shadow with the Thames lip-lop-lapping along the Embankment.

Some sort of remorse, anyhow. One ought not to feel . . . elated, ought one? *Bollop!*

I like Ettie and Hermione and Gruff, and I like Orchard Leigh with its clean, white rough-cast and its bright green paint. I like the burr-r-r-r of the car . . . everything . . . home . . . myself. I rather like myself—*gurglop*—yes . . . even myself. And . . . and Leeta.

Leeta.

Queer. Like things . . . anna-vers'ry . . . she looked really splendid—Ettie, I mean. M-m. Glad I got her that dress.

This kissing . . . No, not right.

Too hot. Chuck the damn' thing out. *Blump!*

The mood did not last. The *élan vital* of the night before evaporated with the dawn.

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Mr. Birtwistle, like most purely objective, practical, hard-headed, honest business men, had practically no conscious control over his emotions.

Orchard Leigh claimed him once more. It was impossible to withstand the dead weight of tradition. The domestic humdrum had been shattered for a few moments, —an hour or two at the most,—but the next few days saw Mr. Birtwistle completely engulfed once again as "Father," and everything in and about Orchard Leigh going on exactly as before. It was like the sudden stopping of a clock which is taken up the next moment and shaken, so that only a second is lost.

"I think it 's doing Father good—going up to London," said Hermione, but Mrs. Birtwistle had had to counter this from other people.

"The poor man 's worked off his feet, I know that; I don't know about doing him good."

"More cheery—*you* know, seeing people—and . . . well, it 's a change, I s'pose."

"Of course he 's more cheery now that he 's got things all put right at last with the London people. But as for change . . . what he needs is a quiet rest; not traveling backward and forward to London and meetings."

"Well, he *looks* much better, anyhow, Mother; not so sort-of hunched-up and moochy."

"Of course he does, ever since I persuaded him to have his glasses seen to. You remember how he used to sit all screwed round sideways, straining his eyes when he read the paper? I 've been telling him to go and have his eyes seen to, for months and months, and at last he went, last Thursday. It 's extraordinary what a difference it 's

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made. He 's so silly about that sort of thing . . . and, of course, I could n't go for him or I would."

Toward the end of the week Mr. Birtwistle felt an insufferable longing for . . . London, and the Parisienne.

And . . . well . . . yes . . . Leeta.

He was looking forward to London, eagerly.

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VI

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S LEETA LOOKS AT LIFE

JUST thirty pounds left, and when that 's gone, what am I to do? Thirty pounds won't last long. . . . *Damn!* My life 's all broken up.

Nérédah Leeta Escourt Fairjohn sat on a seat in Regent's Park, somewhere near St. Katherine's Lodge; near enough to the Zoölogical Gardens to hear the distant puking and puling of miserable mammalia. A gray squirrel came and sat on the path and twitched his tail.

Regent's Park was a gray-green monotone; the path a strip of dull umber; the sky a lowering rain-filled sheet of slosh-color cut across by the dark-brown interlacement of bare branches. And in the midst of this, on an iron seat, backed by a dado of iron railings, sat Leeta; a slim slip of a girl, tightly encased in almond green to the knee, breaking into the supple curvature of silk-clad legs—long, white legs, tipped with tiny black patent-leather shoes.

I 'm not going home, anyhow, whatever happens. The gray squirrel twitched his tail, looked round, nibbled a husk, and twitched his tail again. Not home, whatever happens.

Home? Home? The Vicarage, Tedding Chervil, with poor old Daddy in his threadbare clerical clothes and his "Ah, Mrs. Bumley, I 've been hoping you 'd come and

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help decorate the church. Oh, you 're going away to Harrogate? Dear me, well . . ."

Daddy—the Rev. Joseph Burgoyne Tuffnell—and the Sale of Work for the North China Mission at the Church House . . . The village . . . ugh! No wonder Leeta Tuffnell had escaped.

The war had come like a refreshing breeze upon the fetid stagnation of Tedding Chervil.

And with the war had come Jack Fairjohn—Captain John Fairjohn, R.F.A.—and six intense, joyous, madcap months of love and love-making—war-time love-making—reaching its crescendo in ten days of nuptial ecstasy. One of those hasty "war weddings" charged with molten emotion and based upon the silly sentiment "We 're young, we love, I may not come back from the war. We must—oh, Leeta, we must—"

Ten days later she was a young "war-widow" ordering "black."

Poor old Jack! Dear old Jack! I never really knew him, but he was such a dear boy.

Leeta's marriage was one of those half-hysterical frolics born of patriotic concupiscence, and the I-don't-care-what-becomes-of-me attitude which always overtakes moon-calf minds when social standards wabble before inevitable economic necessities.

That six months' courtship, with its hectic climax of dances, dinners, revues, night-clubs, cabarets, cocktails and kisses, unsettled Nérédah Leeta for life. Carried to the heights of passionate desire, of luxurious laziness, clad in dainty dresses, fragrant with subtle perfumes, beautiful, young, flashing, care-free and adventurous, rushing headlong through that brief period of blazing emotion with its tragic background of heroism, mud, and ignominious

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death, she had never been able to come down to earth again; to Tedding Chervil Vicarage, and the drab disillusionment of post-war England.

The World War had meant troops passing through Tedding Chervil; Captain Fairjohn billeted at the vicarage; a sudden kiss in the disused, dim, cobwebby and dust-laden stable at the back; a hungry desire for . . . for . . . for Jack; a terrible, blank, childlike fear of . . . of losing . . . Jack; love-letters; trinkets; whispers; secret meetings in country lanes—and later in London—and then, the wedding.

The honeymoon—ten days in paradise—had been spent in London, at the Hotel Parisienne. Jack and Leeta at the Parisienne . . . and then, Leeta left all alone at the Parisienne. No money. Jack had no money. It had been love and laughter and squandering recklessness, on an army captain's pay.

Daddy and Mumsey (yes, Mumsey was alive, then, crippled with rheumatics, but always pathetically cheerful, with a wistful, exhausted smile)—had been "just splendid." Daddy had said, "Ah, Leeta, we never thought you would be married and a widow within a few days. It 's sad, Leeta, it 's dreadful to contemplate, and you 're so young; but be sure there is always a welcome for you here, our only daughter . . . a widow now. Poor Leeta, poor Leeta. You know I can't give you much in the way of money,—dress allowance,—but you 'll always find a home here—the old home. It 's the most I can do, Leeta."

Dear old Daddy. . . . But the return to cowsheds, cottages, and Christianity, after that exotic, syncopated intoxication, became unbearable.

I can't stand it. I must get away. I must get away

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from this deadly place and these deadly people. So she had scraped and saved every penny in the hope of making an escape from the vicarage and the village. During this dismal period Mumsey passed peacefully away and was laid to rest in the topsy-turvy old churchyard. After that Daddy seemed to turn in upon himself; his kindly gray eyes looked out upon you with automatic sympathy and an unfailing but fixed expression of devout pity; and yet he was never really there inside. His ego withdrew itself to some invisible inner sanctuary, some place apart, hidden from mortal ken.

Came the armistice and blank years of saving and scraping and wondering whether one would ever escape from this dead-and-alive existence.

A drink-sodden, gout-laden farmer tried to make love to her. She hated his blotchy purple face and his filthy, broken finger-nails. She detested his glaring, watery eyes, his riding-breeches and his gaiters. He was people's churchwarden, and one had to be polite. Oh, one must get away from all this! Earn one's own living somehow —be independent. London.

Had she enough to start in business? A job? Find work? Try to open a shop? What ought she to do? Oh, if only Jack had come through! I won't spend a penny I 've saved, except on bare necessities—clothes and food and fares—while I find work. I must find work.

As a captain's widow her pension amounted to £130 a year. Some girls might have been able to scrape along on it, but Leeta was not that sort. She yearned for gaiety and life; every fiber of her being called out for new excitements. She needed a succession of expensive thrills expressed in little luxuries. She was not made for a village vicarage and she knew it.

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She went to London several times, looking for work. To begin with, she had imagined it would not be too difficult. Then it appeared that even these typist-girls had to be able to tap quickly and accurately on a typewriter, and that needed training; and the training in shorthand and typing would take a long time—more than a year; and even then one was not sure of a job. Besides, Leeta's spelling was shockingly bad. She had no ear for spelling. Over and above all that, did one want to be a shorthand-typist in some beastly office? Why should one spend one's life wilting in an office?

After all, I don't see why I should drop lower than I need. Why can't I find work which is interesting and which needs . . . well, needs breeding and education and . . . well, better-class work altogether? (Spelling, of course, had nothing to do with breeding and education.)

At last she answered an advertisement in a newspaper which asked for an "educated young woman of refined manners" to assist as saleswoman in a "high-class costumier's establishment, apply, Box LX 537."

A week later she was at work at a salary of £1 per week, with a commission on sales, for "Madame Yolande," a little shop in a turning off Sloane Square, S. W. "Is n't it splendid, Daddy?" she wrote home. "I 'm really earning my own living and the commission basis means I 'll be able to save quite a lot. I can hardly believe it 's true!"

"Madame Yolande" sold "Paris Models" to typists, tea-shop girls, poor gentlewomen, and any one else who happened to come along.

"She" did a good trade, but all "her" employees were underpaid on this commission basis which, described in glowing terms before the engagement, when it came to hard cash, amounted to nothing worth bothering about.

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The most you could hope for, even in a really good week, was a total of £2.

Together with her pension, Leeta's income came to something like £3 15s. od. a week, of which £2 2s. od. went to a Mrs. Dewey, who ran the Belmont Residential Hotel, (Leeta could not bring herself to go into dingy, poky lodgings) leaving £1 13s. od. for other expenses. Leeta's "other expenses" frequently ran up to, and over, this amount.

After trying hard to convince herself that she would soon cover the deficit on the "commission basis," she had to draw on her capital for a few pounds.

When she went out to lunch at some obscure little eating-house, she ordered a cup of tea and a bun. Week after week of such a diet was bound to have its effect. Strong, tannin-poisoned Indo Bond Clip-Edge Tea, a dry bun full of alum and carbonate of soda, and cigarettes. It was impossible to spend much on food and to dress decently at the same time. It was very silly, but she was only conforming to the custom of most young women who are "in business." These tea-and-bun lunches brought on indigestion, and she smoked more and more cigarettes to soothe the aggravated nervous system.

She had asked for a raise, but as she had only done two months at "Madame Yolande's" she was told flatly that there could be no question of a raise, especially as her agreement provided for a generous commission on sales. Each week she found it more depressing, more hopeless and impossible. Her father, unselfishly squeezing the expenditure of his meager stipened to its last penny, going without his half-yearly subscription to Mudie's, and postponing the purchase of a new pair of goloshes for winter parish work, sent her a small check now and then which

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she was able to bank. She was liable to buy things which were not really necessary. She bought cigarettes and sweets. She bought grapes at 8s. 6d. a pound for one of the girls who was knocked down in Regent Street by a taxi-cab and taken to the hospital with concussion. She bought expensive shoes and stockings, and she never kept any sort of accounts of her income or expenditure. She was not even quite sure how much she had in the bank. Now and then she was able to get rather nice hats and dresses at a discount from "Madame Yolande's."

She hated "Madame Yolande's," and she hated the thought of returning to the vicarage; and yet she did not want to "break into" her meager savings. She found she had no real friends in London, and she did not fraternize with the other women in the "first-class costumier's establishment."

She was too shrewd to be bamboozled by mere respectability, and too respectable to "let go" altogether. She came to the conclusion that work at "Madame Yolande's" was more detestable than living at the vicarage, and yet she was unwilling to go back to Tedding Chervil. One must go on, and one must try to save money. Oh, those dreary, empty, meaningless, blighted months in the Sloane Square shop! . . . She tried—hard. But why should one slave and slave and slave for next to nothing? Why should one be shut up in a shop when one was still young and full of life and laughter?

There had been men—any good-looking girl in this civilization (and Leeta was almost beautiful in a quaint, asymmetric way) is followed about, stared at, winked at, smiled at, and generally ogled by sex-hungry males, but it was not until after the "Madame Yolande" period that she had worked out a code of amorality which led at last

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to Teddy and her present fear of pending impecuniosity.

The fact was, Leeta was entirely useless in any sort of organized scheme of life. Once she had an idea of going on the stage, but even here she found one had to have some sort of irksome training—dancing, elocution, singing; awful drudgery. She was slim, elegant, vivacious, young, gay—and entirely inefficient in every other way.

If only Jack had n't been killed . . . life might have been one long paradisean Hotel Parisienne, with the "Savoy Orpheans" playing Hawaiian melancholies in saxophonic flatulence.

Poor old Jack! Why could n't Life be kind to me and spare Jack?

There were moments when the full tragedy of the war touched her pathetically; stabbing at her poor, lonely little soul poignantly. She always refused invitations to dance on November 11th. In some dim, dumb ache of the spirit she felt it would be wrong to rejoice on such a day; that Jack would n't like it. . . . I don't want to forget him. Any mention of the war—Flanders' Poppies, Cenotaph, Nurse Cavell, "The Glorious Dead," St. Dunstan's, the Unknown Warrior—meant Jack, and the desire to sob, silently. And that was queer, because there were nights when she might be seen with Efty-boy doing the 'Possum-Tango-Purr at the Pillar Box, very near the blurred hilarious frontier of cocktail incoherence. "Awrigh, Fre'ie, jus' wum-more. *Do* gimme a gasper, there 's g'boy."

Came a day when her banking account stood at just over two hundred pounds, as a result of half starving, scraping, and with the help of a little windfall of a legacy left her by an almost unknown uncle in Yorkshire. Two hundred pounds in the bank! . . . Capital—two hundred capital to fall back upon if the worst came to the worst.

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It was a comfort to feel that she had something to rely upon, and it was this very feeling of hard-won independence and relative affluence which set in motion that cat's-cradle of cause and effect which was to terminate the "Madame Yolande" experience.

"Madame Yolande" in the flesh was a small, pot-bellied man, with a sallow face, showing a bluish border where the safety razor ran, bulging eyes, and an Israelitish nose that moved in pendulous synchronism with the rich curves of his sensual lips. His name was Apfelbaum, but he called himself Appleton.

It was Mr. Apfelbaum who had explained the commission basis when Leeta applied for the post.

"Toon-arf per cent on all sales. Toon-arf per cent! Tink off it—toon-arf per cent!" He was quick to realize that it meant nothing to Leeta; she was unable to calculate what "toon-arf" per cent might mean. Mr. Apfelbaum explained further:

"Toon-arf per cent on ten towsand pound ees two hondred ant feefty pound! Teenk off dat! *Two hondred ant feefty pound!* On eff'ry ting you sell, toon-arf per cent. . . ."

Mr. Apfelbaum did not explain that it was necessary to sell forty pounds' worth of goods in order to earn one pound on commission.

This Mr. Apfelbaum was a man who attended to his business with an almost feverish concentration. It was he who worked the "commission basis" so that it should not exceed the limit, and it was he who sacked those too-ambitious saleswomen who, after serving twelve months in the establishment, approached him for a raise. His method was to get in new girls and push off those

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who might imagine they had found regular employment.

"For goot beas-ness—cut ant shoffle," said Mr. Apfelbaum to his enormous wife.

"Dees Mees Fairjohn doss-ent vairk hardt enoff. She ass no beas-ness abeelity—non vateffer."

There had been moments when the soul of Leeta rose in one red-hot riot against the sodden realism of Apfelbaum's business morality, but she had always curbed her tongue and avoided any shindy with the "boss" or his wife. After all, one must n't fall out with one's bread and butter, must one?

But this two hundred in the bank—this rich sense of security—acted upon Leeta as water acts upon quicklime; it made her fume and it slackened her commercial ardor. One or two "rows" with Apfelbaum resulted.

"Mine teer curl," said Mr. Apfelbaum, suavely, "neffer loose tempah een beas-ness. Alwais sm-i-i-i-le and say 'Tank you.' Yong Eenglishe curls tink: Me? I am neffer peen slaaf—Rule Pritannia ze wafe. Bert in beas-ness all peoples merz pe slaafs."

"You dirty, fat pig! I won't be your slave, so you can do what you damn-well choose, see? . . . *Beast!*"

A week after this Leeta found herself out of work. I *won't* go back to Tedding Chervil, she had determined, and I can't stay here in this miserable boarding-house with nothing on God's earth to do.

In spite of her experiment in earning a living, Leeta had no knowledge of London; no idea of what to do nor where to go, and no one to advise her. London to her meant the Hotel Parisienne, a tea-shop, a theater, and a dance-club; just as the war had meant Jack and a lot of other men in khaki—the Boys. It was perfectly natural that

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she should gravitate toward the Parisienne. It had a sentimental attraction, and it was the only place she knew of where she felt at home.

Jack had taken her to the Parisienne after the wedding. It was a bright, warm, jolly place, with heaps of nice people always coming and going, and a band playing cheery music. It was the sort of place where Leeta could function smoothly as Leeta—just being Leeta and looking quite enchanting.

She had decided to go there for a day or two—even if she had to find work later on. She would have a holiday from "Madame Yolande's." She would get away from Mrs. Dewey's Belmont Residential Hotel—ugh! the people there! She would stay at the Parisienne and forget "that filthy slug Apfelbaum and his loathsome female. I must get the taste of them and their beastly business out of my mouth. Ugh! I deserve a rest. Oh, how I hate shop-people and how I detest boarding-houses! I was n't made for work, any old how."

She had bought herself new clothes, all kinds of new things—recklessly. She went to Harrods, Selfridges, Peter Robinson's, Debenham's. She wrote checks. It was glorious after the months and months of cramped-up existence.

Splash it about a bit. Why should n't I? I 've slaved and skimped long enough.

She had determined to go on the bust for a day or two. Just for a day or two. Why not?

Thirty pounds left. One must have money. Nérédah Leeta had no illusions about the future. The path lay straight before her. She was simply calculating what it was worth to be an old man's plaything. What else could

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she do?—thirty pounds in the bank. All that was left of her two hundred.

Her conscience seemed to have died. As she sat there her thoughts went off at a tangent. She was thinking of F. T. Dowell—Efty-boy—and how she had first met him at the Parisienne; she was thinking of the dances, the music, and the week-ends. . . . It had been an easy death for conscience.

She was fond of Efty-boy in a strange sort of way. He was a jolly good sport, and such a good dancing partner.

At first she had imagined he might propose to her. She had wanted him to propose to her, but she soon abandoned any such thought. It had not taken her long to discover that Efty-boy was not the marrying sort.

If she went to him now and said, "I 've only thirty pounds left in the whole wide world," she knew what kind of reply she would receive: "But my dear girl, how perfectly awful! What on earth are you going to do about it?"

She could well imagine Efty-boy fading out of the picture altogether. He had seen too much misery in his young life to want to come into contact with it unnecessarily. Disillusioned—Efty-boy was totally disillusioned.

What am I going to do? Thirty pounds won't last long.

Old Teddy-boy wants something. . . . Yes, he wants something. I have n't got his story out of him yet, but I can guess what it is, pretty well. Married man . . . fed up . . . middle-aged . . . Oh, it 's the old, old yarn. An oldish man suddenly smitten with the desire to sow a second crop of wild oats. Very tame wild oats.

How long would the sowing take? Was it worth it? What would she get out of it? With a mental *click!* that

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was almost painful, a light flooded her thoughts. She was actually considering herself for sale!

Oh, not that. Not that. No, not that.

She could not think of it seriously. No, not that. She would only be giving Youth and Happiness in exchange for . . . well, yes . . . for money. But what was there more wrong in that than in selling rotten, flimsy frocks at a thousand times their real value to girls and women in much the same predicament as her own? After all, in doing what she had been doing, she had unconsciously passed the Rubicon.

At any rate, there was nothing so very wrong in thinking out her problem and considering whether this middle-aged Teddy could be made to help her in this imminent financial crisis. And even if she did decide to . . . to . . . well, to do it, she would be hurting no one but herself—deceiving no one.

Whatever she gave was hers to give (*Jack's!* whispered a voice. Oh, cruel conscience, when Jack was not there to save her!)

The gray squirrel, frightened by an approaching perambulator pushed by a blue uniformed nursemaid, flicked his tail angrily, ran along the top of the railings, and did Blondin over a tracery of twigs.

Leeta did not notice any of this. Her mind ran over the events of her life during the last few years. Regent's Park was nothing to her but a green-gray haze; the people who passed nothing but colorless shades; even the iron railings dissolved into the general blur. . . .

She recalled this second stay at the Parisienne. Oh, it had been good to get away from Apfelbaum and Sloane Square and the "commission basis"; splendid to be free, with money in the bank!

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And, after all, she had n't been a fool; she had n't just squandered it. She 'd made it last out pretty well, all things considered. One can't stay at the Parisienne or anywhere else for nothing. Besides, where else could one go? One could n't walk about the streets all night.

As luck would have it, she occupied Room 64, the very next room to that which Jack had booked for their few days of honeymoon. Fate plays queer tricks upon us. . . .

She remembered the evening she had gone down to dinner and sat near the band, and how the conductor had smiled at her and asked her if she would like any special piece.

"Oh, do play 'Mammy's Li'le Cocoa Coon' for me!" she had begged. The band had filled the room with the strains of that wonderful, lilting, lulling, love-soaked glide —"Mammy's Li'le Cocoa Coon." Jack . . . the last dance she had ever had with Jack, the night before he went out. Divine fox-trot, throbbing with love's memories for Leeta—"Mammy's Li'le Cocoa Coon." Her last dance with him. Her soul had been flooded with its sadness and its joy, lifted into another world, a world of laughter and love which had come to an end when that terrible War Office telegram arrived. His last dance with her.

"Mammy's Li'le Cocoa Coon" was dated; it was obviously one of those war melodies which had kept up the spirits of thousands of young officers on leave for a few days from that inferno on the Western Front, which claimed the Youth of Europe like a mechanical Moloch. The troops had whistled "Mammy's Li'le Cocoa Coon" on route marches. It carried one back to 1916–17–18. Its rhythm was so fundamentally different from the post-

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war tunes; so absolutely different from the callous jazz of "Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?" and the raucous revelry of "Hold It Down."

The war had hallowed the commonplace sentiment of "Mammy's Li'le Cocoa Coon." Tragic memories had consecrated this almost forgotten war-time barrel-organ favorite. And as she had sat there with her pink and cream and chocolate ice swooning in a particolored pool, some one had spoken to the conductor. The conductor had, gallantly, indicated the lady in the rose-colored dress sitting by herself at the table over there. A few moments later she was reading a penciled note which said:

Forgive this liberty. I understand the band has just played Mammy's Li'le Cocoa Coon at your request. It has filled me with memories of other days—days which can never come again. Might one, without offense, ask whether you too responded to some hidden chord in calling those notes to life again?

She had looked up from that scrap of penciled paper, and caught the eye of a tall, sallow-faced young man with a tiny black mustache and gleaming teeth. He was sitting alone in an alcove. He was watching her intently, evidently not sure how she might receive his bold inquiry. She smiled at him; and Leeta had a smile which few men could resist. He clutched the table, stood up, hesitated, looked round, and then came across to her.

"You did n't mind?" he said.

"Rather not! why should I?"

"That 's good of you . . . I . . . I wondered. You see, that song, 'Mammy's Li'le Cocoa Coon' . . . there were a whole bunch of us together at a dance . . . 1917 . . . on leave . . . some of the fellows of the Thirteenth . . . and it brought it all back to me."

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He looked at her a little nervously. She smiled.

"We 'd all agreed to meet at Ciro's for a sort of farewell bust-up."

"Was that on the third of September?" she asked.

"Yes, the third of September, and, curiously enough, it 's the third of September to-day, is n't it? You were n't there, were you—that night at Ciro's?"

"The third of September, nineteen-seventeen. . . . Yes, I was there," she said as if she were talking to herself.

"Joo know I . . . somehow I half thought I 'd seen you before, somewhere. There were half a dozen of us from the Thirteenth that night, all pals . . ."

Leeta's eyes filled with tears. Mr. F. T. Dowell stopped, bewildered.

"I say, I 'm so sorry! What have I done?"

"You did n't know, Captain Fairjohn,—Jack Fairjohn, —did you?"

"Jack! Poor old Jack! I knew him well. Jolly good sport he was. We were in the same battery. Dowell's my name—F. T. Dowell."

"I 'm . . . Mrs. Jack Fairjohn," she faltered.

"I say! I *am* so sorry! I did n't know I . . . I 'd . . . you will forgive me?"

"Oh, I hate the war! I hate to think of it, even."

Efty did not know what to do. He wanted to cheer her up somehow.

"Look here," he said, "let's go to the . . . the Pillar Box and . . . and talk. It 's more . . . well . . . cheerful. Shall we?"

"I 'd love to," said Leeta.

They got a taxi and drove to the Pillar Box. They sat sipping Benedictine. They talked and talked, and later on they danced. They talked about that farewell dance

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in 1917, at Ciro's. They talked of the boys of the Thirteenth, and how they were all due to go back to France on the same boat-train for Folkestone. The dance at Ciro's had been one last glorious roust. Leeta's last dance with Jack. . . . "Mammy's Li'le Cocoa Coon." She could not really remember Mr. F. T. Dowell, and he did not really remember Leeta, but they felt they remembered each other; they wanted to believe they remembered each other.

It was enough for Leeta that this tall, good-looking young fellow had been there; that he had been a pal of Jack's; that he had served with Jack in the same battery. "Is n't life queer! We may have danced with each other that night at Ciro's in nineteen-seventeen."

"Extraordinary, how one meets again like this," said Efty.

"And . . . all through my asking for 'Mammy's Li'le Cocoa Coon.' It 's too absolutely sort-of poltergeistish—you know, uncanny, almost."

From that chance meeting they had gone on to an intimate friendship. Leeta had met other people at the Pillar Box—Maimie, for one.

She had spent week-ends with Efty and a hilarious houseboat party on the river. Efty and Leeta had fallen into easy relations, and all the time Leeta felt that this was a link with Jack. The only link she had. In fact, Efty-boy became a living symbol of Jack. She felt that she was nearer Jack when she was with Efty, and this unconsciously excused any sort of liberation from conventional restraints which might have seemed unwise in other circumstances. There was nothing exactly wrong, she felt, because it was all more or less hallowed by the memory of Jack. Efty was Jack's friend. Efty had

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been with Jack in the Thirteenth. Efty had known Jack "out there." Efty had been only half a mile away when Jack was killed. One ought to be decent to Efty for the sake of Jack.

But now—only thirty pounds left, and one could not rely upon Efty. One did not want to rely upon him. What, exactly, ought one to do now?

The gray squirrel had gone. The dado of iron railings flickered into position. The iron seat became a reality. The bare branches fell down over the sloshy sky like pressed seaweed.

I shall have to. . . . There 's no other way.

Her mind was made up. She went out of Regent's Park in a dream.

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VII

MR. BIRTWISTLE BUYS A NECKLACE

GODWIN was one of those who believe in trousers and skirts not merely as a protection against the cold, but also against immodesty and carnal appetite. However, this pathetic faith in Finest Quality Men's Wear and Elegant Winter Modes broke down, hoplelessly, when it came to Leeta's arched eyebrows and her slender, swan-like neck. In fact, all the normal restraints broke down.

So far there had been no serious difficulties. Suddenly Dodd announced that he would be going up to London.

"Oh, well then, no need for me to go up, is there?" said Birtwistle, rather put out because it meant altering his plans. He had misgivings. One did n't want Dodd to . . . to get to know about . . . anything.

"Come along up with me—do you good—why not?"

"Lot of work I ought to get on with here. . . ."

"Bunkum! Come on up with me."

"Well, I 'll see, Dodd. I 'll see if I can manage it, I 'm not sure."

Mr. Dodd withdrew, leaving Mr. Birtwistle in a state of inner agitation. He got up from his desk and poked the fire. Miss Greenhalgh came in and said, "I made it up just before I went out to lunch, Mr. Birtwistle."

"Eh?"

"It ought n't to want poking; I made it up before I—"

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"Oh, yes—hum!—I was n't thinking."

"It 's better coal this time from Leer and Spills, that other was all slate."

"Um-m . . . yes, yes. I 'm busy thinking something out just at the moment, Miss Greenhalgh."

"Yes, I thought you were, Mr. Birtwistle; that 's why I came in to see if you wanted anything."

That woman 'll drive me mad one of these days. She will chatter. Can't leave me alone in my own office . . . poke my own fire if I want to.

'Course if Dodd 's going up there 's no need for me to go as well.

But Mr. Birtwistle wanted to go. He did not like the idea of Dodd at the Parisienne. Leeta might be there. Dodd and Leeta. Could n't bear the thought of Dodd and Leeta. Supposing Dodd should, by some chance . . . er . . . get to know Leeta. She might mention Mr. Goodchild—Teddy—and she might give the show away. Without knowing it, she might blurt out something which would reveal the identity of Teddy Goodchild to Dodd. Apart from that . . . one rather liked going up to London.

Don't see why Dodd should go. I mean I don't see why I should stop behind.

At the same time, it would be quite impossible to face it out with Dodd. Leeta would probably be there and she would not know. She would smile and say, "Hullo, Teddy! but how blithesome! *do* introduce me to your li'le pidge' of a pal, won't you?"

Well, that would be out of the question. Quite out of the question. It 's no good. I can't go. If Dodd 's going, I can't.

He began to walk up and down his office. He stood by the window and twiddled the varnished wooden acorn

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on the end of the blind-cord. It clicked against the window-pane—tap, tap, tap. He looked down upon the filthy street through the grubby white lettering glued to the window-pane.

Dodd—Dodd & Co. Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co. Why on earth should Dodd take it into his head to go up? No need for him to go. Can't I be trusted to look after the firm's interests without having Dodd to . . . to . . . well . . . hanging about? It is n't as if there were anything of importance; nothing out of the ordinary; nothing I can't settle without consultation with Dodd, anyhow. I don't see why he wants to go up to London all of a sudden.

He went over to the mantelpiece and brushed away some crumbs. Cake crumbs. Yellow cake crumbs. Saffron-yellow cake crumbs. Miss Greenhalgh always brought him a glass of milk and a slice of Madeira cake at 11 A. M. And she always put them on the mantelpiece, because he always stood with his back to the fire and ate the cake and gulped the milk. There was the milky ring on the marble where the glass had stood.

Yes, well that settles it. I sha'n't go.

He went over to his desk and sat down. But no work was possible. The very thought of Dodd going off without him upset the day. He rose at last and strode into Dodd's office.

"Dodd," said Birtwistle. "I don't think I shall stay at the Parisienne this time."

"Eh? Why on earth not?"

"Fact is there 's a friend of mine—a man I used to know, years ago—and he 'll be staying at the Euston Court. I 've promised I 'll stay at the Euston Court this time, Dodd—with him."

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"But, hang it man, you can meet your friend at the Parisienne, can't you? Ask him along."

"No, I can't very well. Old school friend of . . . of other years. Like to see him again . . . quiet talk . . . old times . . . sentimental attachment . . ."

(I do hate all this tissue of falsehood!)

"Oh, well, all right, Birtwistle, do as you like. You 'll come along and meet me at the Parisienne, I suppose, and bring your friend, eh? We 'll go to another show or something. Pity Pertwee and Cossett won't be with us."

"Yes . . . well, let 's leave it like that. I 'll see how I can fit things in."

"Well, thank God I shall be at the Parisienne. You 'll be coming up on the same train I suppose, won't you?"

(No, no, somehow I . . . I could n't stand it . . . not Dodd on the same train.)

"As a matter of fact, Dodd, I can't get up till the day after. Thursday you go, don't you? Well, I shall come up Friday."

"Why, what 's happened?"

"Oh, nothing, Dodd, nothing. I . . . well the fact is, I promised Hermione I 'd take her to the Slithby Sheep Dog Trials in the car—"

"That is n't next Thursday; it 's the week after."

"Er, is it? Well, anyhow, I know I promised Hermione I 'd take her out somewhere in the car on Thursday, and you know what it is, once you 've promised."

"Yes, *I* know," said Dodd, meaningly, but Birtwistle did not feel quite sure about the meaning.

"And besides," added Birtwistle, as a convincing afterthought, "my old friend won't be there until Friday, so you don't mind, do you, Dodd? I mean you do understand how I 'm fixed?"

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"Quite. I shall go to sleep most of the way. Anyhow, we 'll come back together?"

"Oh yes . . . yes, rather!"

"You 'll be going up to-morrow, won't you, Godwin?" said Ettie at breakfast.

"Ah, no. No, I sha'n't be going up until Friday this week, my dear."

"But why not? You said Thursday."

"Well . . . ah . . . I 've had to arrange things differently. Er . . . there 's a board meeting on Friday which I must attend," (*liar*, liar, LIAR!—there is n't) "and so I 've had to cut out Thursday. Dodd 's going instead."

"But won't you be going up with Mr. Dodd?"

"No. I 've just explained, my dear, Dodd 's going up on Thursday in place of me, and I 'm going up on Friday." (Extraordinary, how precise and insistent one becomes when it 's all a pack of lies.)

"But it 's so queer. You 've never done that before, Godwin."

"No. Well, one can't foretell beforehand. I 'm not a thought-reader. I was n't to know things would get shifted round like this. It is n't my fault, my dear."

"Of course not. Still, I don't think they give you much consideration. I don't see why you should have to have all your plans upset. Why could n't Mr. Dodd go on Friday?"

"Oh, well, there you are!" said Godwin, and dismissed the subject with an expressive shrug.

"I 'm sure this going up and down, backward and forward to London, is getting too much for your father, Hermione," said Ettie on Friday, after they had "got him off."

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"Does seem a bit ratty about something."

"He 's never ratty. I 've never known your father to lose his temper once the whole time we 've been married."

"I thought he seemed a bit put out about something."

"Well, is n't it enough to make any man feel exasperated to have to rearrange everything and have everything upset and put off to the next day without a word of warning? They don't seem to think of him for one moment. Who was it pulled the firm through the difficult times during the war? It was your father. Who was it bore all the brunt of the post-war trade depression and piloted the business through the most precarious financial straits the Company had ever known? It was your father who did it all, working early and late; giving advice; interviewing people, drawing up schemes; going into every detail because there was n't a single one of them who could be depended upon to know what to do. As long as he shoulders all the responsibilities and gets them all out of tight corners when things go wrong, they don't care. It 's no wonder he 's going gray. And now that he 's arranged everything and done everything about the Northern Steel amalgamation they don't even give him a rest from these board meetings. No, they must needs chop and change about—Friday instead of Thursday—without so much as by your leave or a word of thanks and consideration. He 'll have a breakdown before we know where we are, and *then* who 'll be to blame? It 's no wonder he 's feeling upset."

However, the farther away from Orchard Leigh Mr. Birtwistle found himself the better his temper became.

The farther away from the *ump-clank-fump* of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co. the less uneasy was his conscience, and the more buoyant his humor; and this was

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odd, because he knew in a vague sort of way that he was leaving his home and the office in order to . . . to go up to London for . . . for no particular reason . . . nothing important.

Of course one could call in at Norvic House and have a chat, but . . . well, there was no real need to do so.

The idea of Dodd alone at the Parisienne, and the possibility of his meeting Leeta, seemed to drag Birtwistle up to London.

He would have preferred to be with Dodd all the time, but that would only tend to precipitate matters. He had not mentioned Dodd to Leeta; and he had not told her not to make any sort of sign of recognition if he (Birtwistle) should appear at the Parisienne with a friend—or friends.

I must tell her that. I must tell her . . . er . . . to be careful about things. She 'll understand. She knows I 'm a married man. She knows that.

A sudden wave of queasy puritanism overtook him between Crewe and Nuneaton.

This must stop! Altogether. Understand? This silliness with Leeta must stop. I shall not see her again. I decline to see her again. I shall not stay at the Parisienne in future. (Have to make up some excuse to explain to Dodd.) My mind is made up. It cannot go on. No harm so far, but all these lies are horrible. I hate it. And what is she? Nothing. Nothing whatever. A girl I picked up at the Parisienne. She may be a . . . a . . . well, she may not be . . . respectable. I don't know about that. Never mind about that. Whether she is or not, this must stop. I shall go to the Euston Court, and in future I shall always stay there.

At the same time I ought to play the game; I ought to

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tell her. Well, I shall. I shall make a point of seeing the girl and telling her. I shall say: "Leeta, this cannot go on. There are reasons why this cannot go on. You understand? I mean . . . ah . . . this kissing cannot go on. It 's not right. We both know it 's not right. We 'd better not meet again. Good-by, Leeta." What will she say? "But how devastating!" or something silly like that? Or she 'll sob and cling to me, and say she does so like her "li'le Teddy." No. I 'm determined to put an end to this. I shall see her and tell her plainly but firmly that it can go no farther. Yes.

Having made this definite resolve to clear up the whole business, he became more cheerful altogether. Self-esteem came oozing back, and with it a comfortable sense of after all I have n't done anything wrong; and I can soon put it all square by just telling her . . . well . . . nothing doing.

The train was nearing Bletchley when it struck Birtwistle that it would only be doing the right thing to . . . well . . . to give the girl something. Not money, of course. One could n't do that. She was n't a common girl. But some little thing. Sort of farewell gift. Happy ending to . . . to a . . . jolly little snatch of friendship. (Such a pity she started this kissing! Why could n't we just have been good friends? So silly!)

Anyhow, see her, and tell her. Nicely, of course. And then, a little parting gift to . . . round things off. She 'll like that. And, anyhow, I don't suppose she 'll care. I wonder if she *will?* I mean, I wonder how much she 'll mind. . . .

It was borne in upon Mr. Birtwistle that she might not mind at all. Perhaps she would take it all quite calmly, and say: "Oh, all right, Teddy. *I* don't mind one little

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bit. Just as you like. I'm sorry I kissed you. *Good*-by."

It was painful to think she might take it matter-of-factly. He hoped she would not.

A necklace. Why not a necklace? The real thing. None of your Tecla imitations; none of your Burma Scientific Gems. A nice little rope of real pearls. Wonderful poise she has; so graceful, like a young swan, whattertheycallit? Cygnet—like a young cygnet. A necklace of pearls would suit her splendidly.

Again he felt a surge of satisfaction. Things were getting themselves sorted out. One was n't bothered any longer. One knew what to do now. It must end, but it must end happily, gracefully. Explain things, and—the little gift would do the rest. Then one would feel one had done nothing . . . er . . . shabby. 'Bout £150 for a necklace. Well, one has to pay for these little adventures in Piccadilly, what?

It amused him to look upon it for a moment from that angle, although he knew quite well that this friendship had been as blameless as the Annual General Meeting of the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Church of England.

It never struck Birtwistle that his necklace was an insult. He thought it quite the right thing to do. It never dawned upon him that the attitude he had taken up was "Here 's a hundred and fifty pounds for you, Leeta; so now we 're quits; and don't let 's hear any more about it. . . ."

He thought this necklace idea was a brilliant notion. It would please Leeta and it would smooth the way for rather an unpleasant task—this final leavetaking.

Queer to think we sha'n't meet again. I've come to

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look forward to seeing her. Yes, there 's no doubt about it, I do look forward to it; and when I 'm working in the office my mind strays away to . . . to the Parisienne . . . and Leeta. "*So!* Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?" Even at Orchard Leigh, my own home, with Ettie and Hermione in the room, I 've sometimes found myself day-dreaming of London and Leeta.

That shows it 's got to be ended. One must be sane and level-headed at my time of life. I 'm not *old,* of course, but still . . .

Even the thought of seeing her again in order to tell her that doleful decision gave him a feeling of delicious expectation; an exquisite incoherence tingled slowly through his brain.

But how was one to see Leeta at the Euston Court?
How was one to dodge Dodd at the Parisienne?
I 've got to see the girl, somehow, and explain.
This thing must end before it goes too far.
(Damn-good-looking girl she is, too.)
Silly old fool, I am. Old enough to be her father—
Old? Old? Who says I 'm old?
I 'm not old. Not a bit of it.
No.

It began to dawn very clearly upon Birtwistle, when he had booked a room at the Euston Court and got himself settled there, that he did not know why he had come up to London at all. No need to come up.

It took him more than an hour to convince himself how urgent it had been to come up to London to buy a necklace and say farewell to Leeta for good.

Yes, I must go out and choose that necklace. A sort of keepsake. . . . In years to come she 'll think of Teddy

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Goodchild, sometimes, and wonder where the funny old josser is, and what he's doing. Still, I'm not like some of these bald-headed old coots I see going about with young girls of eighteen or nineteen hanging on their arms. No.

I can't go round to the Parisienne because Dodd's there and I don't want to run into Leeta with *him* about. Dodd'll expect me to go round this evening, anyhow; but in the evening Leeta's sure to be there. Why did I come up? Why didn't I stay at home? Still, it's a change. London does me good. I don't see why I should n't come up if I want to, even if there is n't a board meeting.

He tried to be cheerful; tried to convince himself that he liked the Euston Court and the people in the lounge and in the smoking-room. Nice, quiet place. And it's nice coming back to it again. Like returning home after a long journey. Prodigal son sort of idea. . . .

But the more he tried to fit himself into his environment, to account for his presence in London, and to make himself at home, the more dismal it all became.

What Mr. Ponce had said proved to be only too true. Albert the head waiter was no longer at the Euston Court. He had left the year before.

The nice, rosy-cheeked chambermaid was still there, to be sure, but her cheeks, so it seemed to Birtwistle, were not so fresh and not as rosy as heretofore, and she lacked that sprightly "Yessir! I will, sir!" of the old days.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he asked her.

"Oh, it's—lemme see, now, it's Mr. Birtwistle, is n't it? Well, yewarer stranger, sir, these days."

"You used to bring me up a hot-water bottle—always. 'Member that?"

"Did I, sir? Fancy yew rememberin' that, now!"

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No, it was all very, very flat. Not so young as she once was. Still, we none of us are, if it comes to that, I s'pose. Not old, of course, but we don't get any younger as the years roll on. Dessay she 's had her worries and troubles, like most of us, poor girl. Used to be quite good-looking, too. . . . Ah, well.

The hotel seemed to be full of country clergymen and their wives (some sort of church congress, or convention, or something), a number of business men from Manchester and the North, and several nondescript people with nothing to do.

Compared with . . . well, with the Parisienne, there was a drabness, a certain melancholy monotone, about every one and everything.

One of the clergymen's wives kept saying, at regular intervals of seven minutes, in a powerful, raw-sienna voice: "Don't you think we ought to go and meet Aunt Hilda, dear, before Harold arrives?" to which her spouse responded: "Noo, may deah, aim sure we had fah bettah wait heah. We mate miss Gertrude."

No one at the Parisienne was called Hilda, or Harold, or Gertrude . . . no. Nérédah Leeta Escourt Fairjohn; more like that; *in*teresting names. All the difference between cold tapioca pudding and . . . and ice-cream Knickerbocker Glories.

"George, I 'm sure Aunt Hilda will expect us to meet her before Harold arrives. . . ."

This hotel is n't what it used to be. Gone down. Used to be quite a good place, quite good. No wonder Dodd said it—

A small, uniformed boy kept calling "Five—One—Four! . . . Five—One—Four!" a plaintive long-drawn-out lament.

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Lord, that's me! Mr. Birtwistle raised his hand as a porpoise might flip a fin. The boy came across to him.

"A Mr. Dodd to speak to you, sir, on the 'phone, sir. This way, sir, please."

Dodd on the 'phone. Oh, Lord! Dodd'll want to know if—Birtwistle felt himself going thin and pale and clammy.

"Yes, hallo?" buzz-buzz-buzz—click!

"'O!" click. Zim-zim-zim. . . . (*Oh, well will you be sending it . . . No. . . . Park six-one-double-O, please. . . . Chancery Lane, because Tuesday next if you sent him . . . too late. All right, Madge, I'll tell him. . . .*)

"Hallo! Yes, hallo?"

"That you, Birtwistle?"

"Yes, that you, Dodd?"

"HALLO! That YOU, Birtwistle?"

"Yes, Birtwistle speaking."

"Well, why the blazes don't you answer?"

"I did; only something or somebody's—"

"What time'll you be round here?"

"Er . . . well, I'm not sure, about that. Not yet."

"Can't you fix it up with your friend? Bring him round about six o'clock, will you, and we'll go to a show or something. Where shall we go, eh? Any bright ideas?"

"Ah . . . wait a minute. I don't think I shall be able to come along. I mean we sha'n't—"

"Eh?"

"We can't come along."

"Why not? I thought you said you would."

"I said I'd see, but . . . he is n't very fit—"

"Speak up! Awful buzzing sound."

"Not well."

"Who? You? What's matter?"

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"No, my old friend. Rather seedy—does n't feel up to turning out."

"Oh. Sha'n't I see you, then? What about to-morrow? Shall I pick you up at the Euston Court? I 'm getting the two-nineteen. So let 's go back together on the two-nineteen if that suits you."

"Er . . . well . . . look here, I 'll . . . I 'll ring you, to-morrow morning. I 'll ring you, see? I 'll let you know, Dodd. I expect that 'll be all right."

"I 'm sorry your friend 's not well, Birtwistle. Rotten luck."

"Oh, it 's . . . er . . . it 's only a touch of . . . of. . . of lumbago—" (Hell! What *do* people have?)

"*Only* a touch of lumbago! You ever had it?"

"Er, no . . . no, I have n't."

"Damn-painful, *damn*-painful. . . . Well, be good. Cheerio!"

" 'By!"

Birtwistle felt his neck clamming to his butterfly-wing Apex 16½ collar, stickily. Wish I 'd never started all this silly nonsense. *Lumbago!* And Dodd 's such a persistent sort of fellow—why, and how, and when, and who—everything.

Here I am, marooned at the Euston Court Hotel. What have I come for, I 'd like to know?

"I 'm sure Aunt Hilda would have sent us a wire if she had n't been coming this afternoon, dear, so don't you think we had better go and meet her before Harold arrives?"

Oh, my God! If that woman says that again— This place is beyond everything. Even the telephones buzz and click, here . . .

Mr. Birtwistle's reserves of amiability were exhausted;

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his usually unfailing supply of self-complacency seemed to be turned off at the main. He began to look upon himself as a ninny, a simple antic, a damn-fool. Nothing was right.

The people were dull. The windows were dull. The walls were dull. The streets outside were dull. The smoking-room was full of stale smoke—filthy, stale smoke. The lounge was full of highly-respectable dejection—middle-aged comfort lounging in arm-chairs. Oldish people. This is a place for oldish people who 've always been slack and sleek and . . . and smug. I 'm not old . . . and I 'm not smug, whatever else I may be.

Dodd 's quite right. *Quite* right. It 's a beastly dull hole. . . .

He 's all right. He can grin. He 's at the Parisienne. Leeta 's at the Parisienne. And here am I—

"George, I 've been thinking. It could n't take Aunt Hilda more than half an hour at the most from Waterloo to—"

Oh, blast! I must get out of this—at once!

Outside, in one of those quiet, dolorous side streets, a percussive street-organ struck up:

So!
Would n't chooliketo Yu—
—catan with me?
Da-da-da-dee!

Restlessness.

Hat . . . coat . . . stick.

A nice, bright December afternoon, with a nip of frost in it, made visible the breath of people and horses as puffs of white steam, like those puffs of talk coming out of the mouths of "Comic Cuts" characters.

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Good, sharp walk, do me good. Keep away from the Parisienne direction. Even if I don't manage to see her, I 'll . . . ah . . . get that little present. How ridiculous it is, avoiding places; going about as if I were watched, or something; afraid of meeting Dodd. Still, one has to be careful. I should hate it if Dodd got to hear about her. He 'd chaff me and blab it all over the place. Besides, he 'd never believe there was . . . er . . . no harm in it; I mean, he 'd jump to conclusions, at once. "Ah!" he 'd grin at me, "who 's been getting off with birds in Piccadilly, eh? You Naughty Old Boy!" No, I 'm not going to risk that.

Now that he was walking briskly away from the depression of Euston Station, L.M.S., the Euston Court Hotel, and the dingy environs of Euston Road, and Euston Square, Met. Rly., Mr. Birtwistle began to feel a different being.

He turned toward King's Cross and then down Grays Inn Road. He found himself staring into the Bassett-Lowke shop in High Holborn and wishing he could have a model torpedo-boat, a model L.M.S. engine, a model yacht, and a model electric traveling crane. Ah, if one were only a boy again, eh? Youth. . . . That mass of miniature engineering fascinated him; the tiny bolts, knuckle-joints, faceplate jaws, derricks, drill cranks. . . . It cheered him to look upon this Little Land of Ump-clank-fump. It reminded him of familiar things; good, sound, solid things: block, roller, and stamp-cutters, spring and doffing plate machines. *Ump-clank-fump*—Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co.

Dodd? Dodd & Co.? Um, well, I 've given Dodd the slip, anyhow. Rather 'cute, eh? Inventing that old school friend with lumbago—lumbago, eh!—ha, ha!

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What a game! Not doing any one any harm, after all. It's all more of a joke than anything else. . . . Only Dodd'll begin asking awkward questions to-morrow.

Some invisible guiding hand directed Birtwistle along New Oxford Street, past Oxford Circus, until he came to New Bond Street, and here it was he purchased the necklace.

It cost £150. One hundred and fifty pounds for a very beautiful little rope of pearls nestling in a sheening crumple of white satin, in a neat black-leather case with a gold line all round it, and a tiny gold crest on the inside of the lid.

The neat little case bulged his breast-pocket as he walked on. That same invisible hand of destiny directed his steps toward Old Bond Street, and so into Piccadilly, until at last he found himself sneaking past the Hotel Parisienne!

He hurried past, glanced at the revolving doors, and then slowed his pace. In there, behind those glass partitions which turned as people pushed in and out, was . . . Nérédah Leeta, probably. Yes, and Dodd . . . unless Dodd had gone out. He hoped Dodd had gone out. Dodd had probably gone out. Most likely Dodd would have gone out. Dodd was always out. It would be safe to . . . to . . . well, to walk past again.

Walk past if I want to. Why not? Yes. I'm not a thief or a rogue. Walk past as many times as I jolly well choose. Who's to stop me? Keep on walking past if I like. Why should n't I?

This time he walked past more leisurely, much more leisurely. I'd better not go in, though. He's probably out, but it's safer not. Much safer not.

When he turned to retrace his steps a third time past

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the revolving entrance he felt that the uniformed commissionaire had spotted him. Had he? Better turn off down here and not keep going past like that. Sometimes quite harmless people get questioned by the police for "loitering." He stood back in the shadows and pretended to be looking into a shop window. He crossed the road and walked by on the other side with one eye glued to the Parisienne entrance in the hope that . . . well, just to see who might . . . go in, or . . . come out.

Then he slowed down again, turned about, hummed a snatch of "No, I never take rhubarb," and, with an almost rakish twirl of his stick, sauntered back again, keeping his eye still fixed upon that glitter of moving glass.

Like the butcher boy waiting for the under housemaid to come up the area steps. It suddenly struck Birtwistle that he was making a fool of himself in front of himself, and just at that moment—Good Lord! There she was!

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VIII

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S APHRODISIAN TRANSGRESSION

KINKAJOU collar, peek-a-boo hat; a close-fitting little hat, like a snailshell made of black petersham that fitted Leeta's semi-shingled head with a flippant, cock-a-hoopish tilt. And up the crown of that hat and over its abbreviated brim bubbled a bunch of outlandish fruit—fantastic Dead Sea fruit—pelican pink, caterpillar green, yellow. The sort of exotic jiggumbobs that Prester John's Ethiopian eunuch fabricated for Najmah of Timbuktu; only these gaudy bobbles were made laboriously by a refined but consumptive widowed gentlewoman at No. 67 Bird-in-Bush Road, out Peckham way.

The "li'le black elephant" on the ivory slave-bangle was falling about round a gauntlet glove.

Birtwistle felt as if one of those impossible but rather enchantingly elongated fashion-drawings from the pages of "Vogue" had come alive (Hermione always had "Vogue" and "Eve").

"*Ae!*" Nérédah Leeta cried, in a tiny *forzando* squeak, "Teddy, but how frolicsome! At the same time I 'm just a lee'le teenie bit—what shall I say—piqued? Piqued 's rather a bonzo word, don't you think? But, seriously, Teddy-boy, why did n't you arrive yesterday? You said

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you would . . . and I've been waiting for you." She smiled; a seductive little scarlet pucker.

What was it he had meant to say? Er, look here, Leeta, this . . . ah . . . this . . . all this . . . this is farewell for the last time, see? Instead of which he was squeezing her hand and smiling down at her. And, of course, one must make an opportunity to . . . to give her the necklace.

"Fact is, Leeta, I'm staying at the Euston Court this time."

"The Euston Court? But, Teddy, how self-denying! Why this austere asceticism?"

"Er . . . well . . . I had to meet a friend there. But I've got rid of him at last, and . . . and here I am, so to speak!"

"Is n't that ni-i-ce, Teddy? But I've been waiting for you and wondering and hoping . . . Nev' mind, I'll forgive you!" She laughed. "Are n't we going to feed? I'm ravenous."

"Rather, yes, but not here, not at the Parisienne."

"Why not?"

"I'd . . . I prefer not. I mean I'm a bit sick of the Parisienne. It's all right, but why not go somewhere else for once? Have a change, eh?"

"How prankish! How perfectly wijum! I do just adore people who go and precipitate themselves into some reckless hazard. So let's—shall us? Only where?"

Teddy was anxious to get away from the immediate vicinity as quickly as possible. He hailed a taxi.

"Look here," he said to the man, "drive me . . . drive me to . . . well, just drive on for a bit, will you, and I'll let you know."

"Right-o, *I* get you," said the taxi-driver as if he were

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quite accustomed to such vague instructions, and (it seemed to Teddy) winked a weary eye.

"Teddy, you 're not running away with me or anything —seduction, or abduction, or whatever it 's called—are you? 'Cos I simply *must* eat first. After we 've fed somewhere we could go to Maimie's flat, quite close to Piccadilly Circus. I do so want you to see her dinkum li'le flat, Teddy."

"Who 's Maimie?"

"Maimie? Oh, she 's a friend of mine. Such a dear, Teddy; she 's away for two months just now, but she 's given me the latch-key, and she told me any time I want to I can sleep there, or anything. Oh, Teddy! *I* know where we can feed—the 'Isola Bella' in Soho. I b'leeve it 's quite a wee wijum sort of place. Maimie goes there sometimes. Let 's try it."

"Funny thing," said Teddy, after telling the taxi-driver where to go. "I 've never been to one of these Soho places. Always meant to."

They came at last to the "Isola Bella" in Frith Street. They sat in a little alcove by the window, and Leeta took entire control. It was Leeta who ordered from the menu, and chose the wine.

During the meal she talked to him of Maimie's flat. There were rose-colored cushions in Maimie's flat, and bright bird's-eye-blue window-sills, with blue-and-white and palest primrose yellow crisscross, sort-of, checky-check-checker curtains—"and, oh Teddy, right in the middle of the most rapturous, rosey-posey, trellis-work carpet you 've ever, ever seen there 's a li'le sooty-black table, no bigger than doll's house furniture, with—what-choo-think on it?"

"I 'd'no. What?"

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"A li'le figure in a crin-o-*lin*, that's really a tea-cozy! Flowered crinoline like rose-colored chintzy-wintz—Is n't tea-cozy a wijum word, Teddy? *Tea*—and *cozy!* Gives me li'le shivers of delight all down my spiney-wine whenever I say 'tea-cozy.' Teddy, you *must* come and see Maimie's flat. It 's too, too dinky for words!"

"M-m, 'like to. Sounds . . . very jolly."

"Simply seraphic. It really is."

They ate wonderfully cooked Italian dishes with queer things floating in olive oil, and afterward Teddy had a really good Old Brandy. Yes, Old Brandy. Good stuff . . . tingling amber liquid. So warm. Alphonse brought it . . . Alphonse with the smile . . . Italy . . . Mussolini . . . Spain . . . sunlight . . . toreadors . . . passion. M-m . . .

A sunny glow suffused Teddy Goodchild; a sunny glow brought on by Old Brandy. There was Leeta leaning back with the kinkajou collar thrown over her chair. She looked like a what-choo-call-it . . . a sylph . . . young, white goddess—nymph . . . that beautiful, beautiful neck (I must n't forget the necklace. Look! while she 's lighting her cigarette—see?) She 's such a little thing, too, next to me. I feel so clumsy; great, lumpy, middle-aged hippopotamus. And her eyelids, now she 's looking down to see if it 's alight, like . . . like the petals of a rose.

"Just like rose petals," he said aloud.

"What are?"

"Your eyelids. I was looking at them."

"Oh, Teddy, you must n't! You simply must not—if it makes you rapture poetic wijums with everybody listening. I b'leeve that 's Cedar Pine, the artist, over there. Just like his photos, anyhow."

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"You 're like a little white—"

"Shut *up*, Teddy! I sha'n't come out with you if you're going to be naughty like this."

"Oh, I'll be good. I will, really. I say, you did n' fin'sh your ice."

"Well, what about going to Maimie's flat now, Teddy?"

"Maimie's flat, eh? . . . M-m. Well, I dunno."

"Oh, come on! You said you would."

"Did I? No . . . did I?"

"'Course, you did. Come on."

Birtwistle liked the "Isola Bella," he liked his first visit to a Soho restaurant, and he was in no particular hurry. The Old Brandy seemed to act upon him as Woodward's Gripe-water acts upon fractious infants, so soothingly.

Then he remembered the necklace. Of course, he was going to make her a little present. Must n't forget about the necklace.

It was Leeta who got Alphonse to go out and fetch a taxi. They were to taxi, she explained to Teddy, to Maimie's flat off Piccadilly Circus; what was it—Juno Street? Juniper Street?—something like that.

"I say, Leeta, are you sure your friend won't mind . . . going along to her flat like this?" said Birtwistle.

Misgivings and doubts came to the surface of his mind; little specks like bees in amber . . . no, no, flies in ointment . . . floating in that sunny glow of Old Brandy.

"Mind? But how lampoonish! Is n't that a wijum expression, Teddy—lam*poon?* I came across it in a crossword puzzle yesterday. Of cou-r-r-se she won't mind! Maimie told me to open the door and walk in any time. Would she give me the key if she did n't mean me to? 'Course not! We *could* go to the Parisienne, but I *did* so want you to see Maimie's flat."

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"Eh? No, no, not the Parisienne . . . er . . . not this evening, anyhow. Besides I *want* to see the flat, after all you 've told me about it."

Birtwistle, who was not used to London, was still more hesitant, and really rather alarmed, when the taxi turned down a side street and drew up at a queer little tobacconist's shop full of "Nosegay" and "Royal Seal," "Country Life," and "Gold Flake," and with a huge notice saying:

He evidently showed his dismay on his bland, oblong face, because Leeta began: "It 's all right, Teddy, you need n't look so googly-woogly like an old owlie-bird. It 's wijum when we get upstairs."

"Wijum? You keep saying wijum. What *is* wijum?"

"Oh, don't be a crotchety-crotchety crosspatch, Teddy. I originated the li'le wijum word. Don't you like it? This way, through here, and then we go upstairs."

She led the way. At last they came to the door. Leeta fumbled in her imitation lizard pochette for the latch-key, found it, fitted it, swung open the door, and switched on the light. They stepped into a very bright little hall; blue walls, with primrose-yellow paint on the wainscoting and picture rail.

"There! *Is n't* it posh?" she said, leading him into the sitting-room. "Look!" she said. "Look! There 's the

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li'le crin-o-*lin* duckums tea-cozy, Teddy, sitting all aloney-ownums waiting for us. *Is n't* Maimie lucky?"

"M'm, I should n't have thought there 'd be a place like this over a tobacconist's shop in a back street."

"No, but is n't it *dink?* Is n't it too dimity-dimp?" she caught his arm and squeezed it and laughed.

"Yes, only I 'm not sure we ought to come and—"

"Oh, Teddy, you *are* so . . . so dunch! Maimie said, 'If ever you want to take a friend round, Leeta, you can, just any old time you choose—' "

"Oh, well . . . that 's all right, I s'pose."

" 'Course it is. Look, we 'll light the gas-stove and pull the checky-check-checker curtains."

It was rather fun fiddling about in a strange flat. Teddy lit the gas-stove with a *blimp!* It was one of those large, open-faced gas-stoves that give out a tremendous red-hot asbestos glow, with tiny blue-and-yellow flames all licking in a row at the bottom.

"I feel rather like a burglar," he said.

"Yes, but is n't it snug? Look, Teddy, here 's an arm-chair for you . . . Sit down . . . And I 'm going to sit just here." She sat on the arm of his chair and swung her legs to and fro. He sat back and smiled up at her. She smiled down at him.

Some familiar heartstring went *ping!* Hermione. Yes, Hermione used to sit on the arm of his chair at home . . . years ago, when she was sixteen and back from school for the holidays. It had been stopped, of course. "Hermione, don't sit on the arm of your father's chair; you know he 's tired out" . . .

Nérédah Leeta's cool fingers passed over his forehead, soothingly. She stroked his head in slow rhythmic time, so gently. And, somehow, that also took him back over

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the years. . . . Of course, that slow, gentle, rhythmic touch; that stroking of the head without ruffling the hair —cool finger-tips across the forehead, sweeping slowly over the head . . . *two* . . . *three* . . . *four* . . . and back again to the forehead—was a favorite trick of Ettie's in the early days, before they were married. Long before the Orchard Leigh days. Leeta's cool white hand sent his mind into a reverie of memory. He remembered the very day when there had been a little tiff. "How can I read the evening paper, my dear, if you *will* keep stroking my head? I'm not a dog. Try Gruff." Yes, that had been the end of it. He even recalled the room. It had taken place in the drawing-room at Hill Side Lodge, New Park Avenue, the year after Frank was born—two days after he had bought a cabinet gramophone and twenty double-sided records, and something had gone wrong with the spring and made it go *click-zip-zip-click-zip-zip* all the time. Ettie had obeyed abjectly. She had transferred her head-stroking to the dog. Poor Ettie. . . . Ah, well, this is very pleasant, very pleasant.

"Happy, Teddy?"

"Ah, how d'joo know, Leeta . . . eh?"

"'Cos I thought you'd gone and turned into a wijums pussums cat. You're very nearly purring aloud!"

By jove, yes—the necklace. I must give her the necklace. Such a surprise.

"Leeta, did you ever play: Open your mouth and shut your eyes and see what God'll send you?"

"What on earth are you babbling about?"

"No, I mean it. Did you? Did you ever play that game?"

"Goodness knows, I don't. Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered . . . that's all."

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"But how mysteriously naïve; like tea-cup fortune-telling in the kitchen—'You will meet a dark man next month'—*you* know!"

"M'm, but this is n't. This is quite different."

"What d' you mean, Teddy? What 's quite different?"

"Something I was thinking of; a little secret."

"But how engagingly sub-tile, Teddy. Do tell me all about it!"

Teddy's views on the little farewell gift, together with the reason for its purchase and presentation, had suffered a complete change. At the moment he saw it more in the light of a Christmas present. It occurred to him, as he sat there in Maimie's flat with Leeta stroking his head, that it was only a fortnight to Christmas.

Poor girl . . . No friends; none of the little surprises that make life so pleasant. What was it she 'd said that night by the Embankment—"I 've no real friends, Teddy"?

He almost forgot his original reason for buying the necklace and, by one of those peculiar twists of which the minds of kind-hearted men are capable, he reached the scene in the New Bond Street jeweler's shop. This time it was in the Christmas spirit, and he really meant it. The whole incident took on a Pear's Annual Superb Coloured Plate of Mr. Pickwick at Dingley Dell glow about it. That necklace, conceived in quite a different frame of mind somewhere between Bletchley and Leighton Buzzard, had, by some emotional transmogrification, become a little gift from the heart.

"No," said Teddy, "I sha n't tell you about it, Leeta, I 'll give it you."

"But what?"

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"You do like surprises, don't you?"

''Cou-r-r-se I do! But visitors are requested nodda tease th' li'le Leeta-bird."

"Close your eyes then, tight."

"Yes—I am—do be quick! Ready, Teddy?"

Somewhat ponderously Mr. Birtwistle drew the package from his breast-pocket, and with equally ponderous gallantry gave it to her.

Off came the outer wrapper.

Birtwistle was as excited as when Hermione nearly caught him, years ago, badly made up as Father Christmas, creeping into her bedroom at midnight with a pillow-slip full of toys.

At last the neat little black-leather case was disclosed. With a squeal of delight Leeta opened it. Almost at the same instant, as it seemed to him, the tiny rope of pearls leapt from its satin nest—and there she was with it round her neck, laughing down at him adorably.

"You darling! How perfectly sweet of you! I'm going to give you a wijum li'le kiss!"

Kisses conform to the intricate mathematical calculations of Einstein's theory: they are ephemeral *plips!* of pure relativity.

The measurement of kisses has, perhaps, never come within the realm of philosophy. It is therefore impossible to say whether the kiss Leeta gave Teddy was in reality a "li'le" one.

One thing is certain, its effect was electrical. Birtwistle himself, if asked to describe the next five minutes—the next hour—would be unable to do so. He never dared to describe that ecstatic period, even to himself.

Kisses beget kisses, and somehow, Mr. Birtwistle least

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of any one knows how, Leeta was in his arms, head bent back on her supple neck to the athletic embrace of an oldish man who had suddenly renewed his youth.

A swirl of emotion caught him, and flung him into a vortex of desire.

Like a Phœnix, Teddy—Teddy the strong, the valiant, the heroic lover of Elysian dreams—seemed to rise up from the gray ashes of Father. For a moment Mr. Birtwistle of Orchard Leigh was consumed, burnt up, destroyed in the bright flame of love.

Some psychoheliotropic impulse bade him respond to the angle of her joy and her shining youth—especially her youth.

("Um . . . Old Birtwistle. Just about past it these days," said Ponce and Hardwick at the Woodlea Golf Club some months ago.)

In that fleeting æon of ecstasy they were both, Teddy felt, transubstantiated; they became an exotic maya-flower with scarlet lips—no, petals!—and a flashing, flower-pecking humming-bird sort of thing, respectively.

No, no, no, it 's that queer little wooden cabinet over there—ah, she 's kissing me again, again and I must, I will!

The cabinet was of East-Indian red sandalwood richly carved in *alto-rilievo,* showing quaint designs of Burmese sun-birds in upsidedown positions dipping their slender beaks into strange orchids of Cambodia, and sipping nectar from fantastic fuschia flowers of Xamdu. It was given to Maimie last October by a young naval lieutenant who had brought it back from Cochin China. It was a present to Maimie for . . . for love, just for love. Such a nice "sub-loot" he was, too. She had told Leeta all about him.

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Oh, never mind about Maimie and her Indo-Chinese cabinet!

If the truth be told, but a few moments of this breathless rapture were enough for Mr. Birtwistle. The position was too Njinskyish in its static plasticism; too outrageously futuristic; too arduously ardent for any but the gods, and "young persons within the meaning of the act" . . .

A tender effort on Teddy's part to disentangle a numb foot, and to resume an attitude more nearly approaching the normal, albeit still intimate, drew from Leeta that wandering sigh which has been the undoing of many a wiser man that Mr. Birtwistle.

Mr. Birtwistle resumed. Foot 's gone to sleep, but ne' mind . . .

It was a pity he was not altogether comfortable. His stout little body, twisted sharply over to the right and there held by the clinging arms of Leeta, was in acute discomfort. His right hand threatened to go to sleep in company with his left foot. He shuffled to gain an easier attitude. Again Leeta sighed.

"*Teddy-h! Ted-deh!*" she cried softly . . .

Of course it was all very regrettable. He realized that in the taxi on the way back to the Euston Court, which he did not reach until 11:30 P. M. He had been in Maimie's flat exactly two and a half hours. Over part of that two and a half hours Mr. Birtwistle's mind struggled to draw a veil, while another, at the moment stronger part, openly exulted and actually had the bad taste to jeer at the steady-going Mr. Birtwistle.

Yes, very regrettable. Very regrettable indeed.

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IX

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S AUTOMATIC REPENTANCE

DO you think Mr. Birtwistle could sleep? No, he could not.

The blameworthiness of his conduct worried and nagged at him the night through. He saw himself as a disgusting old roué, a middle-aged debauchee, a rake.

His conscience kept saying, "Godwin, you have sinned against heaven and earth and are no more worthy to be called my son." Why it said that, or why that particular set of words should come to mind, he was too agitated to analyze. What made it all the more painful was a sub-conscious undercurrent, like the quiet *giggle-giggle* of a mountain beck, which contradicted his conscience. It was like the witless antics of a village idiot who, during sermon time, hidden by a pew, plays *Fly away, Peter! Come back, Paul!* with bits of stamp-paper stuck to his finger-nails, and sniggers vacantly to himself the while.

The unregenerate Birtwistle seemed to be humming:

> **"No, I never take Roo-bub,**
> **I never take Roo-bub, now!"**

Godwin was put back in time so that he appeared to himself as a little lad just going off to his first boarding-school. He was alone with his mother. "Godwin, dear," she said, "promise me you will never do anything you would be ashamed to let your own sister see you do." The poor old lady had culled that from a little book called

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"Straight Talks to Boys," and it was her pathetic last attempt to reinforce his moral fiber before sending him out into the world. It never occurred to her that this particular exhortation was inappropriate because Godwin had no sister. Godwin said, "Yes mother," and went clammy all round his Eton collar.

He had kept that promise all these years, faithfully, until . . . until now. He felt that he had done something which he would be ashamed to let his own sister see him do. And, indeed, he had.

If only morning would come! If only he could pack up and get away—away from London—away from the gnawing sense of his own guilt.

"I 've been a fool!" he said aloud. Then he got up, went over to the wash-stand and took a drink of water from the carafe. In doing so he spilt a gulp of water on his bare feet, and his toothbrush fell with a clatter to the floor.

How shall I ever look Ettie in the eye again? questioned the still, small voice.

After all, need you torture yourself? What have you done? Nothing much. Nothing so very dreadful. Natural impulse.

No. I 've committed adul—a sin—one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

He felt as if all the vigilance societies and alliances of honor in London had knowledge of his transgression and were keeping an eye upon him; as if the Society for the Protection of Public Morals had written to the "Times" drawing attention to his escapade; as if there were Fascistish young men with O.M.S. armlets looking out for him with that bright boy-scoutish delight in tracking an evil-doer to his lair.

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He went back to bed.

Free love. That's what this is. Free love. To think that I—I, Godwin Birtwistle, of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co., Ltd. should fall so low!

Free love. That's what it is. There's no denying it. *Bah!* . . .

Man of fifty-five—nearly fifty-six—with a grown-up family of married sons and daughters (well, one son, anyway), with a wife who . . . who's above reproach . . . who's the soul of honor . . . who would n't believe a whisper of scandal about her husband . . . goes off . . . makes a perfect fool of himself, and goes off with a young girl of twenty-something and . . . and . . . and . . . and . . . well, misbehaves . . . misconduct . . . Yes, *that's* what it is after all; no use blinking the fact. Misconduct, I say, with this . . . shop-girl she may be . . . in Maimie's flat! Maimie's flat. . . . And who is this Maimie? No idea. Some horrible, loose woman, perhaps . . . one of these Piccadilly "birds." There's no knowing. No knowing.

Nonsense, Birtwistle, nonsense! sang that disconcerting undersong. Think of Henry VIII, think of Solomon, think of—oh, lots of people; even Abraham had more than one wife. What's it matter? No use bothering. No one 'll know—

So!
Never mind the rain,
Oh!
Let's do it again!
You're my little Bower Bird, Billee—

Why, bless-me-soul . . . Mormons, thousands of 'em. Utah. Brigham Young died a venerable old man, and did

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it all his life. No, no, you have n't betrayed Ettie. Not a bit of it! Cheer up!

Think of her neck, Teddy, eh? Think of that schoolgirl complexion; those li'le puckered-up lips. Yes, you kissed 'em, and kissed 'em, and so you would again, Teddy.

You 've been a good boy all these years, Teddy; can't you have a little bit of a spree in your old age?

Eh? Old age? *I 'm* not old. No, this is all wrong. I 've done wrong, and I hate myself. I 'm a low-down cad. They say old men, once they go on the loose, are worse than any. Who 's old? I· s'pose people imagine I 'm getting old?

You 're in love with Leeta—oh no, I 'm not. Oh yes, you are. I? Yes, you. What about Ettie? Well, what about her? H'm. . . . No, I 'm not in love with Leeta.

You 're a little liar-bird, Teddy!
So!
Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?

Oh, Lord! it 's striking three. I must sleep!

"I thought you were going to ring me up this morning, Birtwistle . . ." said Dodd when they met on No. 6 platform at Euston for the 2:19.

"Er . . . well, fact is, Dodd . . . I did mean to, and, then . . ." (No, I will *not* tell any more lies!) "I did n't think of it again."

"Oh. Well, you look as if you 'd come home with the milk, anyhow. You been on the razzle, or something?"

"I?" said Birtwistle, rather startled, "Why, how d 'you —I mean, in what way?"

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"All the usual symptoms. I do believe that friend of yours with the lumbago was a blind, and you 've been on the ran-dan with some little Bit, eh? *Eh,* you naughty old man?" chaffed Dodd, poking Birtwistle in the ribs. "You 've been out with the girls all night, eh? I 'll blow the gaff on you! Well, how 's your friend? He has n't come to see you off?"

"Ah, no. No."

Good Lord! I wonder if he knows anything about— No, he can't. Heavens! I never thought of that: he 'll start talking to Ettie about my old school friend with lumbago, and I 'll have to invent his name and his life-history.

"I say, Dodd?"

"Yeah? What?"

"Don't say anything to Ettie, or any of 'em, about this friend of mine. Er . . . fact is, rather painful family quarrel . . . years ago . . ."

"Oh, all right, old chap. I won't say a word. I 'm sorry if I poked fun at a . . . at a sore spot, Birtwistle."

"No, no, that 's all right, that 's all right. Only you know what it is. Open old wounds. Women . . . never forgive."

"Ah, I know, I know," said Dodd, and began filling his pipe.

"There was a wonderful little bit of goods at the Parisienne, Birtwistle. Talk about legs!"

(Might be Leeta).

"Oh, was there?"

"Yeah. I gave her the glad eye, and she smiled all over. See if I can't get off with her next time," said Dodd, laughingly.

"Er . . . what was she like, Dodd?"

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"Like? Like? She was small and flashy and—oh, damn-pretty."

"Dark?"

"No, fair. Golden hair."

Mr. Birtwistle let out a silent sigh by slow degrees. It was all right. His fears were allayed.

"Heh! We talk a lot about it, don't we, Birtwistle? Try to make out we're the nibs, but we're as tame as white mice. It's all talk. We never do anything naughty, but we like to kid ourselves we're two of the boys, eh? And we're both old enough to know better. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes," agreed Birtwistle, "I'm afraid it's mostly talk," and how he wished what he said were true! This conversation made him uneasy. He tried to change the subject, but Dodd began again.

"I knew an old fellah," said Dodd, puffing at his pipe, "years ago; must have been close upon sixty. Married —*puff-puff*—grown-up family—*puff-puff*—married sons and daughters . . . used to go off with some little girl he picked up in Birmingham. Took her to London to his flat . . ."

(*Plip!* went Birtwistle's heart).

"And kept her as his . . . well . . . mistress."

"Hum!" grunted Birtwistle and looked away out of the window at the people on the platform.

"Never think it of him, to look at him."

"No?"

"No. . . . His wife never knew."

"No?"

"No. Does n't know to this day."

"Ah!"

"Fact. You'd hardly believe it, would you?"

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"No."

"Went on for years. Two places. Home in Cheshire, and flat in London. Nice old boy he was, too."

"Yes?"

"Yeah."

The train pulled slowly out of the dinge of Euston Station, and Birtwistle settled into a private gloom, staring out of the window all the time without seeing anything but a sliding smudge of houses, back yards, and trucks mingled with landscape,—blurred trees, gray mare's-tail clouds, and sodden fields,—all rushing back in a fright to London, and all ruled across like a giant's copy-book with telegraph lines.

"You 're very quiet, Birtwistle," said Dodd, looking up from the pages of a wireless apparatus catalogue. Mr. Dodd had a passion for catalogues; they were the only books he read with interest.

"*I* am? . . . Am I?"

"Haven't said a word for the last half hour or so."

"Oh? I had n't noticed."

(I do wish he 'd read his damn-silly wireless rubbish, and leave me alone.)

"You know, you 're not looking well—you look worried. Zif you 'd got something dreadful on your mind."

"*I* do? Ho, I 'm all right. Nothing on my mind. I was just thinking things over."

"You know, Birtwistle, you take things too seriously. You need to learn how to relax—"

(Good Lord! yes, I 've *relaxed* all right. . . .)

"Keep your mind free from business except when you 're actually in the office, that 's the secret. People don't know that."

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"I was n't thinking about business. I was wondering . . . about things in general."

As the train carried them away, leaving Watford and its bedraggled outskirts far behind, Mr. Birtwistle gradually salvaged part of his self-respect. It seemed to happen automatically, and it seemed to have something to do with the train as it rushed past haystack and copse, canal, mill, main road, and signal-box.

First of all, he was glad to be rushing away from London; and he was almost exhilarated at the idea of going home. It seemed to him as if he had been away from home for a long, long time. Queer, how time plays tricks with us all! Yes, he wanted to be home. He looked forward to seeing the white rough-cast and the apple-green shutters of Orchard Leigh. He would feel safe at home. It was a comfort to know that Ettie would be there.

Ettie . . . brave little woman. She 's never failed me, never.

It was nice to think of his eldest daughter Dot and her two bonny children, Effie and David. He would go over and see them at Rollerston in the car. Nice to think of Camilla and George, her husband. Always did like George. And then there 's Frank and his wife . . . yes, and Hermione and Harry. And Gruff. Must n't forget Gruff.

I 'm a silly old fool, but I 'm glad I 've got a good home. I don't deserve it. And a good wife. I don't deserve that, either. I 've done wrong, a great wrong. I 've wronged innocent people without their knowledge. But I can surely make amends?

The other part of him kept breaking in: Ach! don't talk such rot, Teddy. You 'll be wanting to see Nérédah

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. . . Leeta . . . Escourt . . Fairjohn, as soon as you 've slept a night at Orchard Leigh. Yes, you will. I know you, you old fraud. . . .

Go on, don't be so silly, Teddy! When you get home you 'll be "Father" again. You 'll have to be slow, and pompous, and say, "Well, my dear . . . ?" when you come in tired out. Tired out. Yah, tired out!

It must have been a mile or so out of Rugby that Birtwistle startled himself by whistling "Yucatan." It shocked him to find how easily his conscience had been lulled to sleep; how easy it was to forget his moral indiscretion of the night before. And then Dodd joined in:

> . . . **Billee!**
> ***So!***
> **Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?**

And that drew a young man with almost white hair and white eyelashes into conversation.

"They say the fellow who invented the words of that song made fifty thousand pounds within six months," said the young man.

And that roused an oldish man who had a nervous twitch of the lower lip, and who kept taking off his glasses and wiping them on the corner of the silk scarf which he wore round his neck.

"While other poor creatures," he said, wiping his glasses, "can't—" *twitch-twitch*—"get a crust of bread."

"Talking about bread," said the young man, leaning over toward Dodd, d' you ever hear the story about the baker who was asked to make a wedding-cake on a Sunday?"

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The man with the twitch got out at Rugby.

"Did n' seem to like my story of the baker," said the young man, grinning.

"I do hate glum people," said Dodd.

"So-dwi!" agreed Birtwistle.

That journey ended very cheerily in a buzz of laughter, tobacco-smoke, and lewd stories.

Birtwistle knew he had no business to be cheerful; no business to enjoy the company of his fellow-men; no business to let his moral slip slip from his mind. He felt himself getting cheerier and cheerier, as if he had never spent those fateful two and a half hours in Maimie's flat. The nearer home the train brought him, the younger he felt. He did his best to feel miserable, to load himself with a sense of sin, but exactly the opposite effect took place.

Once, he nearly gave the whole show away:

"As I said at the 'Iso—' "

"Eh?"

"As I said . . . er . . . to my friend . . ."

At last the train came into their station.

"Ha, there 's Badley with the car. Well! See you to-morrow, Dodd. My love to Mrs. Dodd, won't you? 'By."

"Hallo, Badley. Nice day it 's been."

"Been pourin'-a-wet, sir, all day up 'ere."

"No, has it?"

"Pretty gen'ral all over th' country, sir, so they say."

"Fact is . . . I never noticed. How s' Gruff and everybody?"

"Oh, 'e 's all right, sir; yes, 'e 's all right. Went orf rabbitin' on his own, this mornin'. Miss 'Ermione arst

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if I 'd call down the town to see if Elliot's 'ad developed 'er Kodak film; so I bin down and got it."

"Well, this is fine! No, I don't want the rug tucked round me."

And so to Orchard Leigh.

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X

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S UNSEEMLY REJUVENESCENCE

"IS that you, Father?"

Oh, it was good, good, good to hear those homely words again!

"It is, my dear!" said Mr. Birtwistle and kissed his wife with *verve*.

"You must be *so* tired, poor dear!"

"No, I'm not! No I'm not! Not a bit of it," said Birtwistle.

"But you *must* be, after all those hours in the train?"

"Well, anyhow, my dear, I'm not. I'm as fit as a fiddle, and as merry as a grig."

"But why?"

"Why not? Seeing you all again, of course."

"Oh, rubbish, Godwin. What is it? You have n't been buying expensive presents again?"

"No, not this time. Oh, I just happen to be feeling well and jolly and sprightly and cheerioish and genial—that's all. Why not?"

"Well, I'm sure I'm very glad, my dear."

"Hullo, Daddy!" shouted Hermione, from upstairs.

"Hullo! How's Hermione, eh?"

"Oh, wijum, Daddy!"

Mr. Birtwistle felt his cheeks blanch, felt himself trem-

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ble, felt a sudden cerebral anæmia overtaking him. He pulled himself together.

"Godwin, you do look pale!" said Ettie. "Are you all right?"

"Eh? Yes, I 'm all right. Quite all right. I 'll go up and have a good wash and a change."

"You 'll find a clean towel put out ready for you, Godwin, on the radiator."

"Right-o, Ettie—thanks," and he climbed the stairs.

Yes, but that was n't the right response.

"Don't be long, will you, Godwin?"

"Down before you can say knife!" he called back.

Yes, but *that* was n't the right response, either.

He 's excited about something. He tries not to show it, but he 's tired right out. Turned as white as a sheet after just walking up the front door steps. We must take care of him. I've never known him to turn pale like that before.

She ran out to Badley, who was putting the car to bed in the garage.

"Badley, is the Monster Thermos in the car?"

"I 'll just see, mum. Yes, mum, it is."

"I 'll take it in." She took it from him and ran back to the hall. Hurriedly she unscrewed the top. *Pop!* went the cork. Hot cocoa. Steaming. Overflowing.

"Godwin!"

"Yeh?" from his dressing-room.

"You *never* took one drop of hot cocoa from the Thermos! It 's full!"

"No need—did n't want it, my dear!"

"Did you take your Ovaltine at night?"

"No! Did n't need it. I 'm not ill—not an invalid. Quite strong, my dear."

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Ettie did not reply. These visits to London seem to . . . excite him. And then after a few days he gets exhausted and irritable. It 's too much for him.

"I say, Hermione—"

"Oh, Daddy! You *did* give me such a fright!"

"Sorry, my dear," said her father, poking his nose into her bedroom. "Did you say *wijum* just now?"

"Yes. Why, Daddy?"

"Nothing. I just wondered . . . er . . . how you came to—hear the word."

"Oh, it 's one of those words that go the rounds. It 'll be dead in a few weeks or months. They don't last long. I got it out of the "Tatler" or "Eve"—one or the other."

"Oh, I see."

"Why? Is it too slangy, Daddy?"

"Slangy? Well, p'r'aps it is a little. Yes, p'r'aps it is a little," said Birtwistle and went back to fiddle about with his trouser-press and his coat-hangers.

A few moments later they heard him humming blithely in the bath-room:

"No, I never take Roo-bub!
I never take Roo-bub, now!"

"Daddy, have you been to another revue?" shouted Hermione along the landing.

"No!" came the bath-room reply.

"Where 'd you get your 'Rhubarb' song then, Daddy?"

"I don't remember—now, my dear."

"Do hum the rest of it!"

"Something about—

"'Give me the Roo-bub, Roo-pert,
For I do like Roo-bub fool!'"

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"Oh, do try to remember it all, Daddy!"

Mr. Birtwistle, closeted in the bath-room, had to shout at the top of his voice. Just as he was shouting out this ribald ditty, Ethel, coming to lay the table for dinner, opened the kitchen door with the silver-basket in her hand. She sniggered. She sniggered distinctly. Ettie heard her snigger. And then, to make matters worse, she had the sauciness to take up the song where Mr. Birtwistle left off and come through the hall humming it under her breath!

"No, I never take rhubarb," was evidently well known to Ethel, and what was bread-and-scrape in the kitchen was *pâté de foie gras* in the dining-room; which is often the case.

I can't think where Godwin's picked up these low-down music-hall songs. I do wish he would n't encourage Hermione in such vulgarity. And now the servants must needs think they can be familiar. I do detest anything which breeds familiarity with the servants. Goodness knows they're rude and pert enough these days, without encouragement.

Mr. Birtwistle did not go to London again until after Christmas, and during those three weeks he found himself more and more surprised, disquieted, and—yes—pleased with life.

Not only did he find himself getting younger, and younger, and younger; doing things he had never done before; but Ettie and Hermione, and every one,—Badley, yes, and Ethel and Jane,—even Gruff, seemed to change.

He woke up with the sun shining in at the windows of his bedroom and the shadow silhouette of a Virginia

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creeper spray moving across the pale-yellow curtain. As the curtain moved erratically with the breeze a shaft of sunlight fell upon the dressing-table mirror, got mixed up with a pair of gold cuff-links, ricochetted, split itself against the edge of an oval photograph frame, and flashed as a shattered double isosceles triangle shimmering with prismatic rainbow-fragments against the ceiling.

He lay back on his pillow and followed the movements of those tiny splintered rainbows as they ran about inside that mad double triangle of fractured refracted sunshine. Outside, in the bare branches of the beech-tree (which almost touched his window and which sent a fogged, out-of-focus crochet-work of twig shadows dancing in time with the Virginia creeper against the casement hangings) some little birds were chirping.

Leeta - Leeta - Leeta! Kinkajou - kinkajou! Teddy? Teddy? Teddy?

"Life 's jolly good you know, eh?" he said aloud, and startled himself.

"Daddy, are n't you up yet?" he heard Hermione call.

"Just this minute!" he called back, and got out of bed and stretched, till he caught sight of his pajamas in the glass and laughed—Charlie Chaplin! Eh? Just like Charlie.

Wijum! Wijum! Wijum! Sweet . . . Teddy-boy! whistled the little bird outside.

I don't know how it is, but, somehow, I don't feel . . . well, wicked. Not as if I 'd really done anything wrong. And I have. I have. I 've done wrong. It 's all topsy-turvy. I feel younger and . . . and more alive, and happy, and . . . oh, as if life 's good. That 's all wrong. I ought to feel repentant and yet . . . I can't.

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I 've been—yes, I have—unfaithful. Unfaithful. To Ettie. And I don't feel any . . . real sinfulness. My conscience seems to 've . . . perished.

He put on his Jaeger dressing-gown and went poddling into the bath-room. *Click!* went the lock. *Schhhwooo-o-o-o-o* went the water-taps.

. . . Oh!
Let's do it again!
So! . . .

whistled Birtwistle, and outside the little bird whistled *Soho-Soho-Soho! Maimie! Maimie! Leeta-bird! Kiss! Do-it, do-it, do-it! Yes? Yes? Yes? Why not, why not?*

It was as if he had been blind, deaf, and dumb, all these years, to the secret joy-song of Orchard Leigh. At every turn he came upon new things, delightful things, things which he had never noticed before. For instance, Hermione.

Hermione seemed suddenly very beautiful to him. It was a revelation, and it happened quite unexpectedly, only a day or two after his visit to Maimie's flat.

It was a Sunday morning. She had accompanied him to the golf-links. She did not play, but carried his clubs for him. They had dismissed Badley and decided to walk home after lunch. They did. This Sunday morning golfing, with Hermione as a caddy, was a new departure.

They set out from the golf-house at about three in the afternoon, and arrived within view of Orchard Leigh—looking like a little oblong of white, with apple-green squares painted here and there on it, stuck like a child's toy on a hill-top—at exactly six minutes past four.

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During that walk Mr. Birtwistle discovered his daughter Hermione afresh. He had lost sight of her twelve years ago, soon after she discarded the long, foal-like legginess of the little girl of nine or ten. Queer how one lives with people and how they become almost invisible. They fade into the environment; get camouflaged in commonplace surroundings. For years Hermione had been simply a name: H,E,R,M,I, and so on. A name which whistled rag-time, took Gruff for walks, took the "Tatler" away from his study before he'd a chance to look at it, played about with the wireless, went off to dances and to tennis with Harry and other young people, and said, "Hullo, Daddy!" when he came in tired out.

The thing happened a mile or so away from the links. They had set out down Flatiron Lane, crossed the main road to Rollerston, got over the stile leading to the Cottage Hospital, turned toward the town with its two great gasometers bursting into the green fields like great red breasts through a torn blouse, and then decided "not to."

"No, don't let's go through the town . . . day like this," said Birtwistle.

"No?" she said. "Well, all right. Through Callow End Woods—that way, shall we?"

"Yes."

It was just as they turned their back upon the dreadful Sunday quiet of the manufacturing town, its filthy aura of piety and poverty, its cheapness, its silent blasphemy, and the faint pungency of coal-gas oozing up from the gas works, that the thing happened.

It took Birtwistle without warning, and yet it was . . . what was it? Hermione by his side; going through the gate; going along the footpath into Callow End Woods; muddy, grassy edges; dead, dank leaves; some cows

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smelling of milk and cow-dung; pale sunlight falling obliquely to the ground; pale shadows; a pale world; pale Sunday; and then—this Something which filled him with a strange excitement and made him gasp and stop.

"Hermione," he said, looking at her critically, even anxiously, as if he were doubtful about something, "what kind of scent . . . ah . . . d'you use . . . nowadays?"

It made him start!—as a young house-surgeon honeymooning in the Ardennes might start at an unexpected whiff of iodoform drifting up the breeze.

Scent! Mad, maya-flower scent. . . . Upside-down humming-birds dipping slender beaks in fuschia-flower petals. Crushed petals. Languorous, exotic, idiotic, delicious, dream-spun delirium of star-spangled perfume. Tantalizing. Lip-lap-lopping in li'le wandering sighs of sudden desire. *Teddy-h! . . . Ted-deh! . . .*

"It is n't scent, Daddy. I *never* use scent. It 's so . . . well, vulgar, I always think."

"Oh . . . ?"

"It 's powder—*Quelques Fleurs.* I always use it. Why? Don't you like it?"

"Yes, yes, it 's quite nice . . . quite nice."

"Why, then?"

"Why? . . . Oh, I don't know, exactly. I s'pose I just wondered. Idle curiosity, my dear, that 's all. I rather like it—in fact I do like it. H'm, yes. *Quelques Fleurs,* eh? *Quelques Fleurs.* Nice name."

The pleasing fragrance with which Hermione powdered her little tilt-up nose seemed to send his senses reeling. Nérédah Leeta Quelque Fleurjohn—yes!—and the kinkajou collar, and the puckered-up rose-bud lips, and the wisp of a li'le lisp, and the arched eyebrows. And the

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li'le wijum kiss, and the bracelet, and the necklace, and . . . Maimie's flat.

"You 'll be asking me what kind of face-cream I use, next!" laughed Hermione.

"Yes," said her father, absent-mindedly. "Er . . . no. Queer, is n't it? I 'd never . . . noticed that powder . . . that perfume, before."

Was it quite the same? Did n't . . . er . . . hers smell more like violets? Feminine. Disturbing. *Quelques Fleurs* face-powder. I must ask her . . . next time . . . what sort she uses.

And then a paroxysm of shame swept through him and made him flutter like an autumn leaf flustered by the wind.

The path narrowed. Hermione walked in front of him. His eye ran over the lithe contours of her body—the easy stride of the leg; the neck, graceful, swan-like—and came to rest where her hat cut across a wisp of goldie-brown hair. With his eyes fixed upon the back of her neck and the movement of the hat-shadow on her firm white flesh, he forgot his twinge of shame.

Now and then he caught the side view of her face when she flung back some remark: "Look, there 's the Ponces' house right away over there—behind that clump of trees. Now it 's gone"; "Was that a motor-cycle on the road, making all that noise?"; "I wonder Frank does n't play golf, Daddy." Snatches like that all the way along.

Birtwistle said, "M-m," and "Oh," and "Yeah," and "P'r'aps so," and "Oh, I dare say, my dear," mechanically; and all the time that *Quelques Fleurs* and the rhythm of her lissome limbs drugged his senses.

Damn-pretty girl she is.

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Nicely dressed . . . er . . . attractively dressed. He liked being out there in the sunshine with her.

Abruptly, as they emerged from Callow End Woods and saw the misty sun hiding behind an opalescent fog-bank, the fields dotted in regular checker pattern with manure-dumps, like so many counters on a draught-board, her father said:

"Harry ever kiss you, Hermione?"

"*Daddy!*"

"Well, I mean . . . I s'pose he *has*, eh?"

"Daddy, what do you mean? I sha'n't tell you. Of course he has? Why not? Why should n't he?"

But Birtwistle's mind was half intoxicated, partially doped, steeped in a hemlock potion of day-dreaming.

"Eh?" he said, "I mean . . . d' you ever get the sensation of . . . of . . . sort of being absorbed into . . . into the . . . into a sort of golden mist with tiny . . . amber-colored clouds floating about and . . . *you* know, sunrise . . . dawn? Absorbed. Sucked up. Er . . . as if one had lost oneself altogether . . ."

"Really, Daddy!" she flung back over her shoulder, "you are *most* weird lately."

"No, no, my dear. I just wonder, that's all. It's quite a . . . a nice sort of . . . of feeling."

"You are such a funny old thing! Any one 'd think *you 'd* been kissing—"

"Eh? Me? No, no. Not me. Not I, my dear. B-but . . . well . . . I 'm not too old for a kiss, my dear. I'm not too old for . . . for kissing."

She stopped, turned upon him, and kissed him playfully. They both laughed.

"You young people must n't think you 've got a . . . a monopoly of . . . of . . ."

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"Kisses?"

"Well . . . kissing, and . . . and . . . and . . ."

"Yes, I know, Daddy."

"Yes; well, you know what I mean."

"I s'pose you 've got all kinds of Ethel M. Dellish love intrigues in London, Daddy?" she bantered laughingly. "It is n't Miss Greenhalgh, is it?" and, somehow, that made him wince.

"Eh? I? Ha, ha, ha!" But his laugh went flat, and, just for a moment, the sun seemed to dip and flicker.

She 's got an awfully graceful back to her neck. I like backs of necks. I like the woven cream—cream wove, cream laid, like notepaper. She 's a damn-pretty girl—Hermione. Never noticed her neck before. She 's attractive. I 'd never, somehow, felt that before. Hermione 's an attractive girl.

One ought not to be attracted to one 's own daughter . . . er . . . ought one? I mean, I quite understand Harry's falling in love with her.

You 're a damn-pretty girl, Hermione! Your mother, or any one, ever told you that? But he thought better of it. He said nothing. He was very proud of Hermione, and a little shy and chivalrous toward her in a totally new way.

"I say! there goes four o'clock! Come on, Daddy."

Graceful, graceful little gazelle . . . *Quelques Fleurs*. The Eternal Feminine, eh? Hermione.

There were six minutes to go. There was, of course, endless duration—the whole of Eternity—to go; but Birtwistle was a fidgety, finite being. It seemed to come into his head . . . her hair, neck, the back of her neck. His tongue went twattling on.

They came out upon the road that swoops up from the

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town, curls round Athelstone Terrace, wriggles into a triple switchback of nice, smooth, slippery tar, and then goes off uphill, *bump-bump-bump,* into loose stones, grit, pot-holes, and mud, past the Orchard Leigh drive with its gray-stone pillars and apple-green gates.

The footpath from Callow End Woods spat them out on that smooth, slippery, tarred undulation. It was uphill all the way to Orchard Leigh. Hermione took her hat off. It was a blue hat with a silly black pleated, brittle-looking cockade that held back the brim in front, as much as to say: "Is n't *that* saucy?"

She took her hat off and strode on with it swinging in her hand. A swiffle of her hair blew out sideways. She was a pace in front of her father.

Something went *blimp!* inside Birtwistle's head (like the gas-stove in Maimie's flat).

He was surprised to find light, goldie-brown, bracken-and-straw-colored hair. His imagination expected . . . well, a long creamy neck, and dark, tightly packed, semi-shingled hair with . . . with sort-of frozen waves, sea-waves, breakers, billows carved in—ebony shadows and bluish lights. The picture of that little dark, semi-shingled head with all those artificial but wickedly enticing permanent wavelets running up from the back of the neck was vivid. He saw himself again in Maimie's flat, at the Parisienne, at the "Isola Bella" . . . No, no, no, here he was with Hermione.

Of course. Yes. This is Hermione. My daughter. But, why on earth does she do her hair all coiled up and screwed round—so untidy? Quite nice hair, too.

"Hermione?"

"What, Daddy?"

"You 've rather nice hair, you know."

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"More compliments! I'm a perfect prima donna, darling! Gladys Cooper and the Venus de Milo are n't in it."

"Um . . only I was thinking . . ."

"What, Daddy?"

"It would look all . . . all golden wavy . . . like ripe corn in a wind . ."

"You 'll begin writing poetry soon, Daddy; you really will."

"Eh? No, but why don't you?"

"What?"

"Get it semi-shingled as I—"

"Dad-*dee!*" she cried, and squeaked like a field-mouse.

"Those little waves all up the back—"

"Daddy, you *are* queer! What is it?"

"It would suit you—"

"But you said you simply detested all this shingling business!" she impeached.

"Er . . . did I? No, did I?"

"You did, Daddy, lots and lots of times."

"Ah, well, I meant this horrible Eton crop sort of thing. Decadent. Taking things too far. Extremes. I hate extremes. But semi-shingled with . . . ah . . . all those little waves down the back of the head. Rather charming, I think."

"Daddy, what 's come over you? You 've suddenly gone—young, modern, or something. I've been wanting to have my hair bobbed for—"

"No, no; not bobbed, my dear. Not bobbed. Semi-shingled."

Hermione shook with laughter, and was serious again.

"All right!" she said, "semi-shingled and permanently waved all over. Only you 'll have to pay for it, Daddy."

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"Pay for it?"

"Five guineas, at least, for the permanent wave alone."

"Five guineas, eh? M'm . . . well, it's worth it. It'll be one of my Christmas presents—"

"And can I really go down to Fotheringay's and get it done? You're not joking?"

"Of course. Of course you can. It'll look . . . quite beautiful. Not bobbed, you understand, and not that dreadful Eton crop. Semi-shingled." He glowed with pride and joy, and several other emotions.

"Daddy, you are a dear old wijums thing."—*plip*—"You know I've wanted to do it for—oh, years—only Mummy's always said, 'No, Hermione, your father would n't care for it; you know he does n't like these new fashions.'"

"I? I never said I did n't. I'm sure I never said a word—"

"Oh, *Dad*-dy! You used to say how hideously ugly this bobbed hair was; a woman's hair is her glory, and all that sort of thing."

"Oh, well, my dear, so it is. So it is. And I *do* think bobbed hair ugly. I don't like it bobbed. I like it semi-shingled."

"Right-o! I'll ring up Fotheringay's to-morrow morning for an appointment, and get my glory lopped off quick. You *are* coming on, Daddy!"

"And I say—it's just struck me—"

"What?"

"I wish your mother. . . I wish Ettie could be persuaded to . . . to have hers done too."

"Mother semi-shingled!"

"Yes. Silvery-gray semi-shingled . . . look wonderful, adorable, eh? don't you think?"

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"*Well . . . !*"

"Could n't you . . . suggest it somehow? D' you think she would?"

"Would? She 's been dying to get it done—like I have."

"No! Has she? Really? Really, Hermione?"

"Yes!"

"B-b-but, but, but . . . but, why did n't she?"

"'Cos she thought you 'd hate it, of course."

"Oh! You think she will, then—get it done, I mean? I 'll pay for it."

"Rather! Wait till I tell her." They turned into the drive.

"You won't let them go and bob your . . . Ettie's hair, will you, Hermione?"

"I will not, Daddy. Trust little me."

There was a pause. Gruff came rushing out to meet them, scattering gravel in all directions in his headlong haste.

"Mummy!" shouted Hermione in the hall. "Mummy! Daddy says we 're both to go and get semi-shingled and permanently waved at Fotheringay's! What-choo think of that? It 's a Christmas present for us both. Joo hear, Mummy darling?"

Out came Ettie from the drawing-room, with three quarters of a gray-and-heliotrope sock for Frank, and gleaming knitting-needles.

Mr. Birtwistle, for the first time, noted her great arched brows. Eyebrows arched. Enchantingly arched, as much as to say, "Well, what about it?" Charmingly interrogative. (Before, the expression of her eyes had always seemed to him to be a little anxious; unnecessarily anxious.)

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Funny I never noticed those great arched brows before.

"Hermione," she said, "what *are* you talking about—semi-shingled?" and then she laughed.

"By Jove, that 's a lovely laugh! Sort of chimey, fairy *glockenspiel* laugh.

"I don't know that it would suit me?" she said, obviously as an inquiry.

"Oh, yes, it will, my dear," said Godwin. "I know it will. You 'll look splendid. Splendid."

That same evening he came across a photograph in an advertisement advertising Phyllis Moele Salons, 14 North Audley Street, W.1 (*Special appointment 'Phone Mayfair* 3370), with the title "Hairdressing Artistry."

The photograph filled him with delight. He ran with the magazine—the "Tatler," "Sphere," "Vogue," "Eve," "Femina," "Woman," one of them—from his study into the drawing-room.

"Look," he said, "look. That 's what I mean," pointing to the photograph; "like that, see?"

"Godwin . . . d' you *really* mean us to?"

"Eh? Of course, my dear."

Then he went back to his study, and looked and looked and looked at that Phyllis Moele Salons advertisement. It recalled so much.

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XI

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S AWFUL UNEASINESS

WHAT should have cast a gloom upon his domestic relationships seemed to illumine his home, and all about him, with a youthful glow, a new interest, a glint of spiritual sunshine which had been lacking these years.

To begin with, it astounded Ettie even more than Godwin; but she soon got to the bottom of it, and was able to account for everything.

"This rest from London and everlasting board meetings is doing him *such* a lot of good! He 's a different being, now that he has n't had to get fagged out on those long, wearisome train journeys every other week. . . ."

"It 's flopped me right out, Mother."

"*What,* Hermione?"

"I mean, I can't make it out. This semi-shingling, and . . . and everything."

"Well, I understand Godwin as no one else could. I understand *just* how he feels. He feels he 's got things into shipshape order at last, after all these years of hard work, and that he wants to reap his reward. It would n't surprise me one bit if he said he was going off bird's-nesting, or . . . or flying in an aëroplane, or . . . playing football, or anything. I know so well how he feels. No one has worked harder than he has, year in and year out.

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And I must say he 's had more kicks than ha'pence in his time, and never a word of complaint. Never one word. He 's built up Blenkin and Dodd, Limited, from a mere nothing. Now look at it! Able to stand up with the Northern Steel people and their millions. . . . *I* don't grudge him his little hobbies and interests. I 'm glad he 's got them. He 's able to take an interest in the place, now, as he never was before. Never."

"The funny thing is he *looks* so much younger, and he can do things—go uphill and walk and run without getting puffed."

"Of course he can, now that I 've got him out of that arm-chair habit. D' you remember how he used to sit all hunched up in his arm-chair after dinner? Never wanted to play a game, or go out, or anything. Tired out, poor man. It is n't as if he were old. After all, he 's only fifty-six next birthday. It *is* such a good thing he 's able to get about and take an interest in things outside the office. He was getting into a rut. He says so himself. And now, it 's as if he 'd taken a new lease of life."

"I know," Hermione agreed, but Ettie's explanation did not seem to account wholly for her father's sudden renascence.

Mr. Birtwistle could not account for it himself.

A certain uneasiness overtook him every now and then. Did people know? Had Dodd any sort of an idea of . . . of . . . well, about anything? Eh? It was just possible. Things did leak out when one least expected it. One never knew. No.

Mr. Ponce must needs come in a week before Christmas. Mr. Ponce was a great, fat, heaving, wheezing giant. An asthmatical ogre. His neck was like rolled

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Irish bacon. His waistcoated belly bulged. His hands were stubby, with fingers like melting candles, thick, muffled in fat. His face was blue-violet where he shaved, alizarin crimson each side of his nose, yellow round the eyes; and he had tiny tufts of hair growing out of his nostrils. Worst of all, he was jovial. In fact he was astoundingly Jove-like. He wore huge golfing-brogues, with fringed flaps that went *flip! flip! flip!* with each stride. The calves of his legs bulged like the exaggerated muscles of a Babylonian bull in bas-relief. And he wore—yes, he did—plus fours. Oh, think of it! Ponce in plus fours! Enormous, baggy, blumbering plus fours. Brobdingnagian plus fours.

Mr. Ponce was a retired ship-builder from Newcastle-on-Tyne. Mr. Dion Crispin Dalrymple Ponce, his name was. His mother had been an American actress before she met Pa Ponce, the founder of Ponce, Son & Bracegirdle, Marine Engineers. Pa Ponce was dead. This was Son. What a son!

And he came that day, a week before Christmas, in a Cadbury's-Nut-Milk-Chocolate-color suit. Chocolate plus fours—Cadbury's. Ugh!

Nature had thrown up Ponce as a military engineer would throw up an earthwork, to withstand an attack. Ponce could stand anything, except the sight of pink blotting-paper, and that made him want to empty ink all over it for no reason at all. True, he was asthmatical, but he had stood it for many years; in fact, he would n't have known how to exist without it. His world was an asthmatical world, with wheezing, asthmatical trees, asthmatical sunshine, and asthmatical twilight merging into a deep, blue, bronchial night.

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Ponce, you remember, was one of the men who passed the opinion that Birtwistle was old—"Old Birtwistle," he said. Hardwick was the other man. "Just about past it, these days," Ponce had said. Hardwick said, "None of us get any younger, I s'pose." Ponce said, "Bit of a fag for the old chap to get round nowadays." Ponce and Hardwick at the Woodlea Golf Club.

Mr. Birtwistle had not forgotten that little incident; had not forgiven Ponce for saying "Old Birtwistle . . . past it these days." No.

Mr. Birtwistle disliked Ponce. Ponce was a pompous person. Ponce was a bore. Ponce was a fatuous individual. Anyhow, Mr. Birtwistle disliked Ponce, and yet, somehow, he recognized that Ponce was "a good fellow at heart." Mr. Birtwistle was one of those good-natured, honest, hearty, open-handed business men who, if they find that some one is a "good fellow at heart," cannot bring themselves to condemn a fellow-being.

Mr. Ponce had a wife, but she was nothing. You could not see her. She was out-classed by this super-dreadnought of a husband. You just thought of Mrs. Ponce as a withered leaf next to a prize vegetable marrow at the flower show.

Mr. Ponce began—jovially:

"What 's come over your good husband, Mrs. Birtwistle? Aha! Eh? Oooooch! *I* know—ha! *wheeze whooze!* These visits to London, eh? Ha! Ooohoo-*wheeze whooze!* Naughty boy!"

Now what the blazes does he mean?

"Whooo-er! See—red in the face! Whoo-ooop! Loogadim! See? *He* knows—he knows what I mean, eh? Aha? Eehee? Wha'? Course he does, eh? I know! *Wheeze-whooze.* I saw you, Birtwistle—*I* saw

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you. Aha! Yes, I did! Ohooo! Naughty—*whooze*—Boy-h—*hw-eez-h!*"

God! Does he know? Does this damn Ponce know? Was I seen? Was I?

"Whooop! Did n' I see you in Piccadilly, eh? Yes-I-did! You—nordy-*h-wheeze*—ole boy*h!*"

Might have spotted me outside . . . er . . . near the Hotel Parisienne. Just the sort of thing which might happen so easily. Birtwistle felt a sort of choke-damp stifling his astral breathing. Did . . . Ponce . . . know? Did he?

"Urghaha! Mrs. Birtwistle, your husband 's not to be trusted alone in London—*wheep-wheezhaha-whee-ee!* Goes off—*aheeph! wheeph-h*—after the girls. Duzzenee look guilty, eh? Wharp? Ehee? Wha'? Guilty."

"Where did you see . . . see me?" said Birtwistle.

"Whoo-hoo! See? He knows. Touched the spot, eh? *Whooze-wheeze-whoo!*"

No. He knows nothing. Ponce is pulling my leg. That 's all. He knows nothing at all.

Birtwistle's equanimity righted itself; some unknown psychoplasm made a gyrostatic recovery. It was all right. Quite all right.

Inanimate objects responded to Birtwistle's renewal of youth. The earth, some two billion or more years of age, keeping time with his own vital throb, regenerated. An Astral Mercury, an Alkahestic Balm of Life, an Elixir of Acharat (ten drops), unknown to Bombast Paracelsus, trickled through the natural world, the works, the office, the warehouse, Orchard Leigh, the kitchen, the bath-room, the garage, Gruff's kennel, the cucumber frame, greenhouse, and potting-shed, the thatched summer-house

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behind Badley's smoldering rubbish fire, the white rough-cast and the apple-green trellis; all, all arose in youthful freshness from their dead domesticity and commercial tedium (*ump-clank-fump*), like the fabled bird after its sojourn of five hundred years in *Arabia Deserta.*

Mr. Birtwistle came home from that serious . . . ah . . . *affaire de cœur* in London and found every one and everything strangely exhilarating. Even Miss Greenhalgh, whose pointed and insinuating nose was pinched by the slow deterioration of age and spinsterhood, appeared to him sprightlier, more delicately molded, with a quite charming expression flickering in her faded blue eyes. He passed her in the passage as she was coming in from lunch and—*plip!*—soft, yellowish-brown fur . . . fur collar . . . round neck.

Later, when he went across to the warehouse he passed her coat hanging up behind the door that led into the passage. As he passed he ran a finger over the soft dyed coney collar, repented instantaneously, and hurried on.

Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co., Ltd., closed on Thursday for the Christmas holidays. Thursday to Monday.

Miss Greenhalgh brought in his milk and slice of bright-yellow Madeira cake and put them on the marble mantelpiece, with the familiar double *clink*-chink of glass and saucer.

"Looks as if there won't be any snow for Christmas," she said.

"No? No . . . no snow. No. Still . . . very jolly Christmas-time . . . Yuletide . . . the children." And then an idea swept like a spark through a mental fog. "But I see you 're well wrapped-up if it *does* snow, eh? Fur collar and all, eh?"

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"Oh, *that* old thing! I 've had it years."

"Ah? What sort of fur is it? Looks . . . nice and warm."

"Oh, it won't be anything. Coney. Dyed rabbit."

That, for no special reason, depressed him. Rabbit fur. Only dyed rabbit-skins. "Any ole rabbit-skins?" It looked just like that, too . . . the same kind of fur. He saw a coat thrown back over a chair in the "Isola Bella."

Miss Greenhalgh had forgotten her coat had been listed in Perks's Autumn Sale Catalogue, as "Stylish well-cut Coat in Ripple Velour, sides slightly flared, collar trimmed Kink Coney Fur. Colours: dark saxe, brown, lizard green, cedar, bois de rose, also tabac or covert." It was marked down from 4½ Gns. to 69s. She remembered that. She did not know Mr. Birtwistle was thinking of another coat, "collar trimmed real Kink, colour: cedar. 9½ Gns."

So funnyovim to ask about my fur collar! I 've never know-nim to ask a question like that before. Going up to London't done 'im . . . him . . . the world-a-good. Brightened him up no end. Looks younger and more cheerful, and . . . well . . . seems to take an added interest in life. . . .

Now and then Mr. Birtwistle encountered moments of abject terror. Heart beating, disordered action, *bump-bump-bump, bump, BUM-P! Oh!* . . .

Brown, the warehouse clerk, came in.

"Yes?" said Birtwistle, looking up.

"Fairjohn and Maimby, Soho, sir,"—*bump-bump-bump! No-no-no-no-bump! Of course!* . . . *Silly-silly-silly!* . . . *bump!*—"askin' for the order number of their last consignment, sir."

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"Oh . . . ha! Miss Greenhalgh . . . you might look that . . . up will you? Thanks. Thanks. All right, Brown. All right. Miss Greenhalgh will see to it."

Another day Dodd burst into his office.

"For God's sake," he began, "don't keep on and on whistling that wretched Rhubarb song! 'Nuf to drive any one cracked! You're worse than a damned office-boy whistling. You in love, or something?"

"Er . . . Love?" began Birtwistle. *Bump-bump-bump* went his heart.

"Yes—love!" shouted Dodd.

"Dunnawajermean . . . Dunnawajermean, Dodd . . . by love."

"Like havin' some beastly bullfinch or . . . or . . . or a confounded canary, or something—'Roo-bub, Roo-bub, No, I never take Roo-bub, Roo-bub, Roo-bub!'—all day long. Can't think . . . or do anything."

"Me? I have n't been . . . whistling. At least not for more than a moment or so."

"Solid three quarters of an hour, man! I s'pose you're so happy about something you . . . you've laid an egg, eh?"

"Happy? . . . Egg? Doanunnerstan'."

"P'r'aps it's thinking about that little girl of yours . . . at the Euston Court, eh?"

Birtwistle was not ready for that thrust. Again his heart did a taratantara.

Does he know? Does Dodd know? Something's happened! He's got wind of something? Has he?

"You're not suggesting . . . ?"

"Only— Well, look here: I've got a splitting headache. Aspirin—"

"I'm sorry, Dodd."

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"All right. I thought you would n't mind if I—"

"I did n't know. Sorry, old man."

Little things like this sent him all hot and cold and clammy; made him imagine people had, somehow, got to know; and yet, his inability to feel sufficiently sorrowful or penitent, the ease with which a contrite heart seemed to cloak his little slip, and, above all, the extraordinarily reinvigorating effect of—what was it?—of . . . of the last few days, the last week or two, filled him with a strange, inconsequential consternation.

This was not a case of *Jekyll and Hyde;* not a struggle between tired-out father and . . . and Teddy Goodchild alias Birtwistle. No, Birtwistle was changed for good and all. Reinvigorated. That 's the word. Reinvigorated. Incomprehensibly reinvigorated.

What worried him was the fact that the sense of sin became less and less. Sinfulness would not settle upon him. True, he dreaded lest his liaison with Leeta should come to light, but even this fear faded away into crackers, red, yellow and blue paper-chain streamers, holly, Christmas cards, crystallized fruits, almonds and raisins, buying presents, and a houseful of adult Birtwistles and young Birtwistles and toys. . . .

And Old Ponce is coming round in the evening, before the kids go home, dressed up as Santa Claus! Asthmatical Father Christmas—*wheeph-whoozh-h!* Oh, good.

(I wish I could feel more . . . more wicked . . . depraved. I ought to feel depraved, morally depraved, and I can't. Somehow, I can't.)

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XII

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S CONNUBIAL RESURGENCE

MR. BIRTWISTLE left the office before midday on Christmas Eve. The car was waiting in the Market Square, with Badley rushing about collecting Christmas parcels from shops; and in the car was semi-shingled Hermione packed round and walled in by brown-paper parcels tied up with string, brown-paper bags with blue-cord handles, green-paper parcels tied up with tape, and a huge turkey bursting out of its wrappings. She waved a large bunch of mistletoe at her father as he came out. He poked his nose toward Badley and said: "Got everything?"

"Yessir, I think we 'ave, sir," said Badley, and grinned.

Then Mr. Birtwistle said to Hermione: "Crackers?"

"Yes, Daddy, heaps!"

"Parcel from Watkins's?"

"Yes, Daddy, what on earth is it?"

"Aha! that 's a secret. Surprise, my dear. H'm, yes, surprise. You do like surprises, don't you?" he concluded, and could not make out why the words disturbed him. This particular "little surprise" was a rather nice imitation lizard-skin pochette. He had got it on the spur of the moment for Hermione. He liked the look of the lizard-skin.

"And there 's another parcel," he hurried on, "from Howard's, I ordered."

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Badley and Hermione hunting through the packages. "P'r'haps you 've got it in front, Badley?"—"No, miss, I don't think they 've sent it along."—"Did n't you call at Howard's?"—"They said they 'd be sending it in about ten minutes, miss. It 'ad n't been done up ready—"

"Well, look here: I 'll pop round to Howard's and you meet me with the car opposite Prosser's, see?" said Birtwistle.

"Very good, sir."

Something for Ethel and Jane. Something for Badley. Little surprise for Ettie. Another little surprise for Hermione. Presents for Frank and his wife. Pipe. Toys for Effie and David. Rather nice silver things for George and Camilla. . . . Something for every one. Fur gloves for Miss Greenhalgh.

This parcel from Howard's was a little extra present for Ettie. A tea-cozy . . . Yes. One of those quaint tea-cozies disguised as a little figure dressed in a crinoline ("flowered crin-o-*lin* like rose-colored chintzy-wintz").

He had passed Howard's that very morning, spotted it in the window, and told them to reserve it for him.

"Quate queent, is n't ert?" the long-necked, pale-faced, false-teethed Miss Howard (who always played the violin at Church Socials, Grand Concerts, and Fêtes in aid of Foreign Missions) had remarked.

Mr. Birtwistle hurried along Church Street, turned down the cobbled smelliness of Pick Up Patience Alley under the pink-washed arch with the orange peel and soapy water in the gutterway, into Swine-cress Yard; a short cut from the Market Square to Howard's shop in the High Street. At the corner of Swine-cress Yard a great oblong white thing stuck out of a shop door. The shop window was chock-a-block with the bright packages,

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yellow, blue, gold, red, and silver tinfoil, of cheap tobacco and cigarettes, and the oblong white thing bore the simple legend:

It was the sign of the pointing hand which sent a little (*plip!*) quiver playing pompalorum jig all through his cerebrospinal system, but he did not connect it with that other tobacconist's shop above which . . . ah, well!

His mind, quite determined not to be linked up to . . . anything of that sort, said: Ugly things, these modern signs. Ugly. Lost the art. Barber's pole, eh? Where 's the old barber's pole? Coaches, jolly people, cobblestones, fat boys, gilt gingerbreads, Sam Wellers, Dickens, Christmas Carols—nothing left of the good old days.

And so away from the . . . from "it 's wijum when we get upstairs, Teddy."

Miss Greenhalgh was quite right. There were days and nights of hard, sharp frosts but no snow. However, a snowless Christmastide made no difference to the prankish youthfulness of Mr. Birtwistle. He did all sorts of things that Christmas Eve. He found Ettie standing on a dining-room chair, putting a sprig of holly behind the reproduction of "Mrs. Siddons as 'The Tragic Muse.' "

He cried, "Caught! Caught in the act!" and lifted her bodily down. Ettie squeaked: "Godwin! Don't! *Oh-h!*" and then he kissed her quickly on the lips and on the back of her semi-shingled neck. It really did look

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quite charming. Those tight little permanently waved waves might have been cast in oxidized silver. And when she looked up at him she squeaked again: "Godwin! You goose! Take the silly thing off, you great booby!"

There he was with one of those combination comic nose-and-spectacles with an elastic round his head.

He went into the garden and lit the rubbish fire—Badley's rubbish fire.

He took out some old copies of the "Times" newspaper, a new box of "Puck" matches, his pipe, pouch, and Gruff. This burning-weed game was a new pastime which he had discovered a few days ago. The acrid piquancy of smoldering cabbage stalks, and the brown and brittle culms of Michaelmas daisies that flare and crackle and go out; the stinging pungency of dead beech-leaves, quitch-grass, smoldering newsprint, and things which Badley called "twitches" and "bents," were frankincense and myrrh to Mr. Birtwistle's nostrils. He went back to his study, lifted the waste-paper basket full of old envelops, letters, circulars, and wrappers, and took it out, to burn the rubbish.

He stood with a garden fork and watched great gollops of thick yellowish smoke unfold; heard the sudden crackle and flare of dry stalks, and the sodden sizzle and *ppfh!* of frost-bitten leaves; and as he stood there in the frosty garden it seemed to him that life was good, that the Spirit of Peace and Good-will was a very real thing, and he whistled softly and lifted the rubbish with his fork for the joy of seeing that column of thick, mucus-like smoke emerge in thicker and thicker folds. The red-hot core of the rubbish fire glowed and roared again, and as it did so Mr. Birtwistle's mind said: Hot Potatoes!—in their jackets, eh? Eh? Why not? Then he lit his pipe slowly

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and carefully, and trotted off toward the kitchen. He meant to ask Ethel or Jane for two or three potatoes in their skins "to shove into my rubbish fire up there . . ." What an adventure—potatoes baked in the rubbish fire on Christmas Eve! It 's red-hot like a furnace, in the middle.

But another adventure overtook him. He called "Ethel! Ethel!" at the back door, and the pimply-faced Jane came instead, wiping her great red hands on a tea-cloth.

"Joo-call, sir?"

"Er . . . yes. I want some potatoes, Jane."

"Potatoes, sir!"

"To . . . to . . . to bake, in my rubbish fire. It 's all red-hot in the middle," and even as he spoke he felt like a boy of ten getting the servants to help surreptitiously in his garden pranks, and blushed a little. "D' you think you could . . . get me one or two? With their skins on, Jane!" he called. "Not peeled! I want to bake them!"

The expression on Jane's face as she went off was wonderful. She gave him just the sort of half-conspiratorial smile which he remembered at home as boy when he used to sneak into the kitchen and ask for string, or an old spoon, or an empty tin. He liked Jane for that compliant, half-mistrustful smile.

Then he noticed the scullery sink full of water and tea-leaves. When she came back he said, "Hullo! what 's the matter with the sink? Frozen up?"

"Yes, sir," said Jane. "I 've poured three kettles of boilin' water down, and it don't seem to make any difference."

Ah, this was better than baked potatoes! The rubbish-heap fire was forgotten; it went smoldering on.

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"You got a candle—a bit of candle, Jane?" said Birtwistle, crawling about under the sink. Ethel came in. Jane and Ethel exchanged glances, and smiled.

"Yes, we can get this thawed with a lighted candle under it; it 's probably frozen at the bend, here."

"Yes, sir. Shall I go and call Badley, sir?"

"Eh? No, no. I can do it. Quite simple. Can you get that zinc bath and that scrubbing-brush out of the way? 'S better. Now, then."

It must have been a ludicrous sight to see Birtwistle under the sink, holding a lighted candle-end to the bend in the waste-pipe. And when at last he emerged there was a great cobweb right across his forehead, which gave him the appearance of a woman who had just pushed up her veil.

"I 've fixed the candle underneath. You go outside, Ethel, and see if anything comes through, while we pour hot water down. That kettle ready, Jane?"

"It 's coming out now, sir! Quite a lot come out just then!" cried Ethel through the window.

"I thought that 'd do the trick," said the master of the house, triumphantly. "Pour some more hot water down, Jane . . . that 's it!"

At last there there was nothing more to do. Mr. Birtwistle came out with cobwebbed forehead, dusty knees, and tallow-candle on his hands and all down one trouser leg.

"Still," he said to them, "we 've done it, eh? Got it thawed out." And then, hopefully: "I wonder if any of the other pipes are frozen up."

"I don't think so, sir," said Jane.

Birtwistle went through the kitchen on his way to the bath-room to get himself cleaned up. He noticed the

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sprig of holly stuck behind a brightly colored calendar sent by W. T. Prosser & Son, High-class Fishmongers, 223, High Street, Tel., 42.

"Have n't you got any paper chains—those colored paper streamers—in here?" he asked.

"*H*-no, sir. We 'ave n't, sir . . . *heh!*" sniggered Jane.

"I bought a lot the other day. Must look Christmasy, must n't we, Ethel, eh? Christmas comes but once a year."

"Yes, sir," said Ethel and Jane together, and they both sniggered.

"I 'd better get some and hang them up. See, now: we can fix them across from the top of the dresser, there. No, better fix them from the bell-indicator to the lamp-shade in the middle, eh? Which colors d' you like? I 've got red, yellow, blue, green, and . . . violet, I think."

But this was too much. Neither Jane nor Ethel could open her mouth. They just looked at each other and sniggered again.

"Ah, well, I 'll get them and then you can see which you like."

"Is n't 'arf an Old Sporty Boy, is n't 'e, Jane? Seems to 've woke up, these last few days."

"Joo know what 'e come in 'ere for? Potatoes! Wanted potatoes to bake in the rubbish fire, up at the back of the garage!"

To which Ethel responded: "Joo 'ear 'im singin', 'No, I never take Roo-bub,' the other day? An' Miss 'Ermione eggin' 'im on? 'Nuf ter make a cat laugh, it was!"

"One thing about it," said Jane, "'e does n't mean ter grow old before 'is time. Ever since 'e 's bin goin' up to London 'e seems to 've got . . . well, younger-looking, some'ow."

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"Done 'im the world-a-good, gettin' away from 'Er a bit. 'Hev yew hed a tarring dey, Godwin?' An' 'is slippers all ready. 'S wonder 'e did n' take to drink. . . . Think the old boy goes off on the spree when 'e 's in London on 'is own, eh? *I* should, if I 'ad to live with 'Er."

"No, bless you! 'e 's safe enough. She 's 'ad 'im on the chain, all these years."

"I like the way 'Ermione and 'Er went and got themselves shingled."

"Miss 'Ermione looks all right, any'ow."

"Yes, but fancy 'Er!"

"Comin' on, is n't she?"

"Followin' in Father's footsteps."

"She 'll be wearin' short skirts an' Russian Boots nex'—"

Mr. Birtwistle returned with the hammer, the steps, a box of tacks, and the paper streamers. Soon the kitchen was bedizened with yellow, red, and green twisted-paper chains, festooned across the ceiling.

"What on earth are you doing, Godwin?" came Ettie's voice.

"Decorations . . . Christmas-time—" Godwin began.

"In the kitchen?"

"Er . . . yes. They had n't any."

"But shall we have enough for the hall, d' you think?"

("I thought she 'd be after 'im, 'fore long," whispered Ethel to Jane.)

"Oh, well! the hall does n't matter much; does it, my dear?"

And so the day went on. Mr. Birtwistle gloried in it. He helped Hermione tie shining metal bobbles and tinsel tassels and tin spangles on a tiny Christmas-tree for the center of the table. He became more and more im-

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bued with the Christmas spirit as the day drew on.

"Have you hung your stocking up, Ethel?" he said jovially, when Ethel came in to clear away the tea-things.

"*Heh!* No, sir . . . *heh, heh!*"

("Godwin, you should n't say those sort of things to the servants. It makes them so—" "Rubbish, my dear! It 's Christmas Eve. Good-will . . . let go . . . jolly old holly . . . Dickens . . . Mr. Pickwick, eh? Enter into it, eh? Why not, why not? Only once a year.")

No need to tell of the Christmas Eve party; of the arrival of Dot and the two grandchildren; of how Birtwistle, hidden behind the screen in the hall, with that comic nose-and-spectacles fastened round his head, shouted "*Boo!*" and so frightened little Effie that she burst into tears and had to be coaxed and petted for half an hour.

No need to tell of all the crackers and jokes; nor how perfectly absurd Birtwistle looked in an Old Mother Hubbard bonnet made of bright-yellow paper, and how they all laughed at him. Mr. Ponce arrived in his Father Christmas rig-out, minus the white beard! He had ordered this part of the make-up, but it had not come. Santa Claus had to face the incredulous and bitterly hostile gaze of Effie and David, Milly Hardwick, and two other children.

In spite of that, it was all very jolly; and Mr. Birtwistle was the jolliest of them all. True, he had had a really good Old Brandy to warm him up. He had ordered Old Brandy along with crystallized fruits, crackers, and a pot of ginger.

"Godwin, did *you* order this brandy?" Ettie had said.

"I did, my dear. Christmas-time, eh?"

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"But you never take brandy, do you, Godwin? I thought you never liked it?"

"Well . . . p'r'aps not. I mean, not much. I like just a very little, at Christmas-time. But, anyhow, I thought we 'd better have some in the house."

Yes, Birtwistle was filled with a happy glow; a happy glow brought on by Old Brandy. Effie and David had gone to bed, and the other children had been called for by nurses or parents.

At last Ponce departed with a tremendous wheezing and whoozing which was spiced, so to speak, with the aromatics of Old Brandy. Harry had gone with Ponce, and Hermione kissed every one all round and went off to bed.

Camilla and George and all the others were coming to-morrow. To-morrow, Christmas Day, the Birtwistle family would draw together like some hydra-headed creature. A family reunion.

Mr. Birtwistle found himself sitting in his arm-chair in the drawing-room at Orchard Leigh with a yellow paper bonnet still riding askew on his head, a comic nose-and-spectacles on the floor beside him, a box of "El Dorado" dates near at hand, the remains of crackers everywhere, a broken festoon falling over the piano, his pipe in his mouth, and a great glow in his heart. He seemed to be alone with Ettie. It was as if the rest of the world had been swept away by invisible waves of . . . ether . . . Ettie . . . permanent waves, and—well, anyhow, this is very pleasant, very pleasant to be alone with Ettie on Christmas Eve.

"Come and sit here, Ettie." He indicated the arm of his chair.

"No, Godwin; it 'll break the chair."

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"Rub'sh!" said Godwin. "Come on."

She smiled at him and went over.

"'At's it!" said Birtwistle, slipping his arm round her. "'At's fine, eh?"

She said nothing. She was wearing that nice sheeny-greeny electric-blue dress with the silvery flummox spangling over it. "Clotilde." Yeah, "Clotilde."

He knocked out his pipe.

"Cigarette, Ettie?"

"My dear, I've smoked *such* a lot to-day!"

"Go on; one more won't hurt. Besides, it's Christmas Eve."

She took it. He lit a match and held it for her. She linked her little finger with his and glanced at him, and laughed. He said nothing. She sat there on the arm of his chair, blowing tiny puffs of cigarette smoke over the top of his head.

"Ettie," he said, "you've got awfully nice eyebrows—arched, high-up . . ."

"Have I, Godwin?"

"Mm . . ."

There was a pause.

"Godwin, your Ovaltine!"

"Oh, for God's sake, Ettie! not to-night—not Christmas Eve! Sit still," and he pulled her over into his lap.

"*God*win!" she squeaked.

She had squeaked like that in the old days, he remembered, when he had pulled her off a stile or a gate by some woodland glade.

How light she is! Such a little thing, next to me. I'm a great lump.

"Your eyes are just as blue . . . as ever they were, Ettie."

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"Are they, Godwin?"

"Mm . . ."

Then, suddenly, he remembered the tea-cozy. He had meant to give it to her on Christmas morning; slip into her room and say, "Happy Christmas, my dear! Here's a little surprise to begin with!" and hand it to her. But he wanted to give it to her now. Yes, now.

"Ettie, did you ever play: Open your mouth and shut your eyes and—"

"It is n't a frog, or anything horrid, is it, Godwin? Not a practical joke? I shall scream if it is!"

"Eh? No, no, no, my dear! No, no . . ." but he remembered those very words. Years and years ago she used to cry out: "It is n't a frog, Godwin? I shall scream if it is!" when he teased her.

"You do like surprises, Ettie, don't you?" and again those words seemed to trail a host of echoing memories after them.

"But you must n't give presents to-night—not till to-morrow," Ettie laughed.

Really a very beautiful laugh. A shy, girlish laugh. Yes, he remembered that laugh, long ago. It was the same laugh. Damn-pretty girl she was, too. I did know how to pick a damn-pretty girl for a wife, anyhow.

"This is a special, extra, Christmas Eve present, my dear, that I got specially for you. If you run into my study, just behind the door, on the bureau, done up in brown paper—"

Ettie kissed him, laughed quietly, and went off to find her present. She came back with it in both hands, squeezing it lightly.

"It 's soft," she said. "Will it break?"

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"Don't squeeze it too hard. Here's a knife for the string." *Snip.* "Now, then!"

Birtwistle was almost as excited as when, years ago, he had given her an engagement ring.

"Oh, how *sweet!*" cried Ettie, and lifted the little crinoline figure from its tissue-paper wrapping. She beamed at him. "It'll go so perfectly with the rose-patterned tea-service, won't it?"

"So it will!" he agreed.

"Godwin, you are a dear! It is sweet of you," and she kissed him as she used to kiss, long ago. Not the peekish little *pp!* but . . . a kiss.

A swirl of emotion caught him. He took her in his arms and kissed her again.

"Ettie!" he cried.

"Godwin!"

She responded to his fierce embrace clingingly, tenderly, ardently. Her response took him by surprise. He felt her warm body molding to his own. This was Teddy —Teddy the strong, the valiant, the heroic lover of Elysian dreams. . . .

In that fleeting moment of rediscovered love, Godwin—no, no, Teddy—felt himself absorbed into a sort of golden mist with tiny amber-colored clouds, and flashing, flower-pecking humming-birds, fantastic fuchsia-flowers in Maimie's—no, no, no—in the drawing-room at Orchard Leigh.

"Godwin, you're *cho*-king me!" He let her go. They stood laughing, both a little out of breath.

Time we went to bed. Bed? Bed? We don't sleep together . . . ! Why don't we? Separate bedrooms. It's years now, since we slept in the . . . same room . . . same bed. I'd taken it all for granted. Six years

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ago, was it? More than that, perhaps. Ettie had that bad attack of bronchitis, and the double pneumonia that . . . that nearly carried her away. Steam-kettles. Trained nurse. Night and day. Awful. She pulled through. Thank God, she pulled through. I had to move into another room during the illness, of course; and, for no particular reason, *I've never moved back!* Took it for granted that . . . that we should go on like that, always. Separate rooms. We've never once mentioned it all these years. No. Queer how one gets into a rut. Very, very queer.

"It's late," said Birtwistle. "Come along; let's go to bed."

Ethel knocked at Mr. Birtwistle's bedroom door on Christmas Day, with his early morning cup of tea. She knocked again. There was no response. She knocked a third time. No sound. Sometimes Mr. Birtwistle slept very heavily. She opened the door and went in with the tray.

The bed was just as she had left it when she turned it down the night before. She saw the slight bulge of the hot-water bottle she had put in. It had not been moved. She drew it out. It was stone cold.

A qualm of congealed terror overtook her: Poison Drama . . . Shambles . . . Weedkiller . . . Gas-stove . . . Hanging in an Outhouse . . .

What could have happened to him?

Then she heard voices in Her bedroom. A man's voice!

Just for the thousandth part of a second the wings of scandal brushed her thoughts.

"My Aunt," she said, under her breath. "'E must 'a slep' in 'Er room last night!"

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XIII

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S PRACTICAL DISCERNMENT FAILS TO FUNCTION

ETTIE was bewildered, delighted, and not a little concerned. She had never, all the years of her quiet married life, seen her husband quite so . . . so gallant, so chivalrous, so attentive; and when she recalled Godwin before marriage, as a young man, as a . . . as her lover . . . well, he had never been quite so charged with the spirit of Youth even in the early days. No, his love-making had never been so masterful, so playful, so god-like, so bold—and she liked it! It took her breath away, it was like going on the Giant Racer at Wembley, it seemed to break up something—some vague Code of Domestic Procedure—which she had relied upon for years, and yet this was Happiness, belated felicity, something she had never known before. A little naughty, spiced with an indefinable tincture of naughtiness, she felt, (you know, like Eve and the Serpent, rather) and yet, of course, it was perfectly all right really. . . .

In her inmost being she had always pined for a few moments filled with the quintessence of passionate love, just a tinge of *The Sheik* commingled with "doing" the laundry-book every Wednesday morning—and now she had it.

It was Wednesday morning. She was sitting in the morning-room at the desk, "doing" the laundry:

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6 Huck towels
4 Pillow Cases
2 Bolster do.

Then she looked through the last week's list and found they had put "not recd." in red ink against her "1 shirt," and "1 HS" against her "3 sheets." While she concerned herself with these household duties—duties which she had always performed in strict compliance with the Unwritten Law of Orchard Leigh—she hummed quietly to herself; a crooning lilt:

"Mm!
Mm-ah mm-ah hum!
Mm!
Mm-ah mm-ah Mm-ah-hum, Mm-ee!
Mm!
Mm-choo mm-to Mm-ah-hum with me?"

the last two words shaped themselves in phonetic realism and brought her to with a start.

"*Mo*-ther!" called Hermione, "was that you humming 'Yucatan'?" and the only reply from the morning-room was a rippling titter—a half-smothered diatonic octave of xylophonic laughter, vibrant with a new joyousness.

Having done with the little blue book of The New Park Steam Laundry, Ettie went off to change a pillow-slip, and on the way upstairs she remembered she had not helped Ethel make the beds this morning. No doubt about, it the Orchard Leigh routine was breaking down. Ettie felt that it was all slipping into limbo . . . and yet it did not seem to matter very much. She smiled to herself as she passed what was now the third spare bedroom. Fancy sleeping apart all these years!

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After all, Godwin 's quite right, we 're not really old. . . . Still, I do hope he won't overdo it in London this time. Let 's see, he 'll want a clean vest and pants. Oh, and there was a hole in his sock, I noticed, last night. In some ways I think London 's done him good. Cheered him up. It 's the long, weary train journey, and the board meetings, that tire him out so.

Just then she bethought herself of the bath-room window, and how it should be flung open to the fresh morning breeze and the dappled sunshine.

"And p'r'aps not!" she heard as she fastened the catch.

There was a sally of raucous laughter.

"You would n't, would you?"

"Chance is a fine thing."

"Eh?"

"I say chance is a fine thing!"

More laughter.

"Go on, I 'm not that sort!" Jane's voice.

"That 's all 'e thinks about!" Ethel's voice.

" 'Oo does?" The butcher boy's voice.

"Ah, well, we 're all 'uman, I s'pose."

" 'Snaughty but 'snice, eh, Jim?" There was a roar of laughter, the back door shut, and a jaunty figure with a cheeky red face went cycling down the drive.

I do wish they would n't waste their time with every errand boy that comes up.

That vulgar phrase *'Snaughty but 'snice!* kept repeating itself all day long through Ettie's mind, like some devil's litany. It annoyed her. The Vulgarity of the Servant Class, she said to herself, is too-o-o dreadful. They think of nothing but Getting Out and Young Men.

Outside in the January sunshine a little bird called: *Ettie? Ettie? Tea-cozy! Tea-cozy!*

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Goodness! I've never telephoned the grocery order! My mind's gone wool-gathering these last few days.

'Snaughty but 'snice!

"Mother?"

"'S dear?"

"D' you know they're going to do 'No, I never take Rhubarb' on the wireless to-night—the Hawaiian Band people with those lovely wailing noises?"

"Oh, do tell Badley not to forget to call for the cells at Skinner's! Father took them down last Monday."

After a few days this unusual elation began to subside.

It was all very well over Christmas and the New Year, but Ettie was quite unable to keep pace with Godwin's new lease of life. It was too much for her. She liked things to be quiet and orderly, and she wanted him to settle down again as tired Father. She did her best to reëstablish the Orchard Leigh routine.

The sudden and unexpected response which had so delighted Mr. Birtwistle on Christmas Eve vanished altogether. He was disappointed. Ettie was staid and motherly again. Kindliness and Consideration came into full play once more. The girlish Ettie he had brought to life sank into Mrs. Godwin Birtwistle, and Mrs. Godwin Birtwistle faded into Orchard Leigh as easily and naturally as a wild creature fades into the sunflecked forest.

Inarticulately, and quite unconsciously, Mr. Birtwistle resented this inexplicable evanescence. It filled him with a moody dolefulness.

He found himself thinking of Nérédah Leeta when he should have been thinking of the commercial enterprises and manufacturing organization of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co., Ltd.

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Mr. Birtwistle was very glad to find that Dodd, Pertwee, and Cossett were not going to London on the twenty-first. To begin with, there had been some talk of all four going up, and it had put Godwin into a fluster. They would have stayed at the Parisienne, of course.

"I may not be able to get along, this time . . . er . . . Dodd," he had stammered.

"But—hang it, man!—you 'll have to speak on that report from Simpson. If we can't get that Glasgow business fixed up so that—"

"Well, but you can deal with the report, Dodd."

"Damn silly nonsense! We 're all going up together," Dodd insisted; "and no more friends staying at the Euston Court with lumbago this time, Birtwistle!"

Godwin went hot and cold. He ran his fingers over his face nervously. It felt like damp dough.

"Eh? . . . er . . . why? What 's wrong?" he asked.

"No more excuses, see? Come on up and we 'll make things Hum; go to a show; bit of a ran-dan, eh?"

Merciful Fate so ordered things that his three friends were detained in the North, while Birtwistle had to go to London alone to represent them and to deal with Simpson's report at the board meeting at Norvic House.

Arrived in London, he made his way to the Parisienne, and was glad to be rid of that bugaboo of his own invention, the chimerical old schoolfellow with lumbago. He was glad to be here amidst the lights, the music, and the gay hum of conversation. The only shadow which fell across his mind was a vague disquietude as to whether any one—some business acquaintance, or some friend of Dodd's, or Pertwee's, or Cossett's, or perhaps of Sir Eli Smith's, the Chairman of the Company—might have noticed him with Leeta at the Parisienne. One could not be

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quite sure, and one could not be too careful, he told himself. It would be better not to meet her here; better to meet . . . somewhere else. Far better. He would have to suggest this, diplomatically, to Leeta.

He was looking forward to seeing her again. Almost a month since that cozy little meal at the Isola Bella and the visit to Maimie's flat.

His great, clean-shaven face, which seemed to be innocent of features, except for the heavily lidded gray eyes that bulged from a bland oblong of contented curves and planes, gave a reflex image in solid flesh of an inward expectancy bubbling gently in his heart.

Very soon he would stroll down and hear that captivating *soupçon* of a lisp saying: "Oh, *there* you are, Teddy! How wijum!" or something like that. The very thought of it made him shiver with delight.

And when, at last, he found her languishing idly in the Palm Court, her slim white body sheathed in an evening gown of *eau de Nil* silk taffeta with fancy ruching of self material, all the worries of the world seemed to vanish.

The sight of Nérédah Leeta Escourt Fairjohn obliterated any sort of prudential assurance which might have lingered with him. A boyish recklessness crept over the Plimsoll line of caution. Don't care if I am seen! Damn-pretty girl.

"'Lo, Leeta, here we are again!"

"Hullo, Teddy," she said.

"How 's Leeta?"

"Oh, all right, Teddy." He thought her voice sounded a trifle flat, somehow; as if she were thinking of something else all the time. She was not wearing the pearls. He wondered why, but said nothing.

They dined together in an obscure corner which Teddy

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imagined would cut them off from the crowded maelstrom.

"What choo do over Christmas, Leeta?"

"Oh, nothing much, Teddy; nothing much."

"Go away anywhere? Friends . . . ?"

"No. I danced a bit."

Evidently she did not wish to talk of Christmas. He tried again:

"You're looking damn-pretty to-night, Leeta."

"I know. I never was modest about it," she laughed; but the laugh, he felt, was forced.

"You worrying about something?" he asked after a time.

"Not I, Teddy! I don't give a damn for God or . . . or Mammon."

For the first time since he had met her Birtwistle thought she was moody. Temperamental, or something. She did not seem to have the old flash and sparkle. He felt it must be his fault in some mysterious way. Was he dull, unutterably dull to-night? Was he boring her stiff? Did she feel he was . . . too old, stale, boorish, middle-aged? He made a gallant effort to be sprightly, gay, debonair.

"What about a show, Leeta?"

"But what is there, Teddy, worth looking at?"

"What about 'Oh, fie, Fi-Fi'?"

"Seen it, Teddy. It's putrid."

"Well, there's 'Coming Over,' at the Palace, and 'Could n't I Love You Some,' at the Hippodrome."

"I don't think I could sit it out. I should weep salt tears of utter vacuity. It n't it adorably null-and-voidish, that word 'vacuity'? Sort of vacu-ummy sound to it."

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"Mm. Well, what about 'Don't Let Father Know,' at the Ambassadors?"

"I can't stick Vio Seraphine; she 's all mouth. Used to sing 'Gee, Boy! What a Girl!' in 'Mine 's a Wing.' Oh, dreadful!"

"Would you rather stay here—just loll about, and rest?"

"Here? . . . But how . . . how mulligrubbish! How dull! Why am I to be left to molder in my own mildew just when I feel I need a psychological cocktail? Why, Teddy?"

"Well, my dear, what *can* we do?"

"Do?"

"Er . . . well." Teddy was nonplussed. He had never seen any woman in this queer state of moodiness. When Ettie was in the doldrums, one knew quite well what to expect. She would be openly peevish and irritable, in a perfectly normal way. But Leeta . . . One did not expect to see Leeta like this. Perverse. Sheer feminine perversity; and Birtwistle had never in all his life come across it. He did not know how to deal with it. Ettie was never perverse. She might be worried, anxious, out of sorts, ill, or even a little put out—but never perverse with this incomprehensible, Eve-like perversity. To look adorable—damn-pretty—and to be outrageously contrariwise, petulant, froward, childishly contradictory! It astounded Birtwistle.

He could not know that this unaccountable moodiness was no mere feminine whim on Leeta's part; that she was considering a serious business proposition; weighing *pros* and *cons* very deliberately, and making her final decisions for a coup d'état. What to him was playful petulance, mere impish waywardness, captivatingly tantalizing, was,

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to Leeta, all part of a desperate attempt to frustrate the indifference of Fate and to win on the wheel of chance with one last throw. No wonder she was strung up. She was forcing herself to keep calm, to talk naturally, to appear aloofly desirable, and at the same time alluringly intimate. Poor Old Teddy-bear, her heart throbbed, he 's not a bad sort. He does n't know I 've had to "pop" his necklace, and I sha'n't tell him if I can help it. Lucky he came to-day. Ugh! Supposing he had n't!

"Where could we go?" he asked helplessly.

"God knows. I 've nowhere. I 've never had any sort of place I could call my own, where I could get away for a moment, from all this." She waved a beautiful white naked arm.

Then she burst out laughing. It was like a javelin sunburst through lowering rain-clouds, he thought.

A bright idea flashed through his mind.

"Could n't we go to Maimie's flat?" he suggested.

"But we can't, silly! Maimie 's back there. Back last week."

"Oh . . ." blankly.

"There 's absolutely nowhere in London where one can be . . . alone together," she said.

"I know," Teddy agreed, but without inspiration.

"Maimie 's one of the lucky ones."

"Eh?" said Teddy, whose mind had gone wandering off.

"She 's got her own li'le sort-of ingle-nook—all tea-cozyish and . . . and snug. . . . If only I 'd got a wijum li'le dink of a flat, like Maimie!" she sighed.

"Well, why not?" he asked innocently.

She looked across at him wide-eyed and suddenly transformed.

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"Oh, Teddy! You don't mean it—?"

"Er . . . well, why not? I mean . . ." he was momentarily bewildered.

"Teddy, you *are* a darling! You really, really mean it?"

"Er . . . well, of course I . . ."

"D' you know, Teddy, I bleeve I know *the* most agonizingly angelic li'le cube of a flat that 's ever been sub-let. It 's too, too lovely! You 'd fall madly in love with it and want it right now 'f you could only see it."

"Yes?"

"So could n't we . . . do something about it, Teddy? It 'll be snapped up in two ticks . . . gone by to-morrow, p'r'haps."

After all . . . much more convenient. Having a place where one can get away from all this. I don't like being seen here with—I mean it 's much more cozy and nice to have a little place. *Pied à terre.* Mm. Dodd, and all the rest of 'em. Out of the way, eh? Rest and quiet. Leeta. One does need a place like that, where one can drop in, a *pied à terre* . . . of one's own.

"It would be so much, much nicer for you, Teddy, when you come up to London, to be able to have your own li'le flat and your own li'le Leeta in it. . . . Don't you think?"

"Eh . . . yes. Well, yes . . . It 's an idea."

"But is n't it lucky I know just the right place, Teddy-boy?"

"Mm, yes. Rather. Awfully good, what?"

"Oh, it 'll be wijum, Teddy! You 're an angel without wings. Besides, I hate hotels. People see you about . . . and they talk—'Thy friend has a friend, and thy friend's friend a friend'—*you* know!"

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"I know, that 's what bothers me, rather, sometimes."

"But when we 've got our own li'le snuggum squodge of a ninkums-den we sha'n't have to play . . . hah! well . . . hide and seek. Teddy, I know the agent-man and I could get an order to view for to-morrow morning. So *do* let 's go and look over it! You 'll love it, I know, and it 'll be snapped up before you can wink! You know what it 's like these days."

Mr. Birtwistle knew this was all going much too rapidly —rapid-motion film—but he did not like to throw cold water on her joyous enthusiasm. He hated any sort of business transaction done in a hurry. Besides, he wanted time to think it all over, and consider the matter, before taking the plunge. Was it really wise to . . . take a flat like this? Still, no harm in just looking at it. Viewing it. No. . . .

"H'm. I 've got an awfully full day to-morrow, Leeta. Got to be at the Cannon Street Hotel at ten-thirty. Important business meeting—and then on to Norvic House for another meeting."

"Well, I 'll try to fix it so that we can have the key and look over it at nine-thirty. How 's that?"

"Mm, well. . . ."

"Teddy," she pouted . . . "Teddy, you 're not . . . not trying to back out of it? I have n't got so much as an attic, or a single stick, I can call my own. I 've never had a home of my own, Teddy, never. You have—"

Those few simple words almost brought tears to his gray eyes.

"No, no, no!" he said hurriedly. "Fix it up for nine-thirty to-morrow. No harm in looking at it. Where is it?"

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She was all sunshine, laughter, and babble again in a moment, just like a child.

"Fifteen A, Lillipot Street. It's a turning off Jermyn Street, Teddy; Randolph and Ragg are the agents. I know Mr. Ragg and I'm sure he'll let me have an order to view for nine-thirty to-morrow. I'll meet you at Fifteen A Lillipot Street to-morrow morning. You'd better make a note of the address, Teddy."

Teddy took out his Eversharp (Christmas present from Hermione) and scribbled down the address.

"Teddy!" she cried softly, "I want to dance!"

"Dance?"

"Yes, dance. I must. You must. We must. Oh, come on—out of this! I've gone all . . . blithesome! I must dance."

She swept him off in a taxi to the Hammersmith Palais de Danse.

He said something about the flat.

"No, we're not going to talk about anything at all, Teddy! You can kiss me if you like, but I just won't talk. I'm too happy and hilarious to talk sense." And she hummed:

"Open up a—
case of—
canned kisses!
That's what—
I want—
Ethelbert!"

Ah, this was the Leeta he had first known! Arching brow; side-slipping eye, trimmed black eyelash; ivory neck; head well-poised; heavily embroidered, permanent,

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semi-shingled wavelets in nigger, navy and ebony; slim boyish limbs wrapped in long cedar coat, Kink collar. Long cinnamon legs.

She snuggled up to him.

"case of—
canned kisses!"

"Leeta?"

"What, Teddy?"

"Is it *Quelques Fleurs* . . . er . . . the . . . ah . . . stuff you use?"

She laughed and laughed and laughed

"But how delicately intrusive, Teddy! And what do you know about *Quelques Fleurs,* eh, Mr. Goodchild? I begin to think you're a very, very, *very* Bad Child, Teddy!

"Open up a—
case of—
canned kisses!"

Palais de Danse. It all overwhelmed Mr. Birtwistle.

"You know it's years since I danced," he told her, "I sha'n't be any use—"

"But how Roger de Coverley! How minuetish! Come on. Canned kisses!

"That's what—
I want—
Ethelbert!"

Half an hour at the Palais de Danse was quite enough for Mr. Birtwistle. It left him just a wee bit out of breath. Slightly puffed.

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"Teddy, you dance boo'f'ly!" she whispered.

Leeta was quick enough to detect his disinclination to continue, and she took care not to make him feel played out and a "bit too old for this sort of thing, eh?"

"Doan wanter dance any more, Teddy," she said appealingly. "Let 's go." Teddy heaved a silent sigh of relief. These sudden changes left him gasping. Leeta seemed to be possessed by an evil spirit, and yet she was utterly adorable.

"Oo, but we have n't danced much. You 're not tired, are you?" he said.

"No, not tired, Teddy. But a-wanta talk t 'you. . . . I wanta tell you things. Quietly. By our own two selves, Teddy. Wanta get away from . . . people."

"But where?"

"We 're like two hunted creatures in a fairy story, are n't we? The woodcutter's daughter and the enchanted prince, looking for the cottage in the wood. I feel rather Gift Bookish, illustrated by Arthur Rackham. Teddy, take me to the pictures."

"The pictures?"

"Yes, we can be quiet there, and I can sit and whisper to you in the quaint kinematographic twilight; I say, was n't that perfectly clotted? Kinematographic twilight! Oh, Bo', what a caption! Take me away, Teddy, or I shall scream."

They were driving now to the New Gallery Kinema in Regent Street. Teddy had enjoyed the dancing, but . . . well, he was glad to sit down in the speeding taxi. He did not understand Leeta's mood, and yet it held him fascinated, hypnotized. Just as he was beginning to think about that idea of the flat, and whether he had actually promised to take it or not (he was not very clear about

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that, and as his word was his bond it rather worried him), she would kiss the back of his ear, and send a succession of minute tingling thrills shivering down his spine. The next moment she seemed to be lost in thought. A second later she was laughing and singing. Then she said, "Teddy, why this untouchability?" and he would take her and squeeze her to him. No sooner done than she wanted to be free to light a cigarette.

"Teddy, shall we have just one li'le something to warm our tummy-tum-tums? What about an Adam-and-Eve-and-Pinch-Me with a nip of Uncle Dick? Or a Paradise Jerk?"

"Er, yes . . . yes if you like."

"Not you too?"

"Oh, yes. I will."

Now about this flat. Did I actually say I 'd take it? I mean did I say, "I 'll get a flat for you, Leeta"? How did it all come up? What was it she said which made me—

"It 's 'College Days,' Teddy. I 've been wanting to see that. Maimie says Harold Lloyd's simply the absolute apex."

"Eh, apex? I mean Lloyd—"

"Take a box, Teddy, and then we can be alone. I wanta tell Teddy all about my li'le self, see?"

Ice-cream and preserved ginger, peppermint and caraway seeds, piccalilli and Chinese chow-chow, caviare and almond paste—that was how Leeta seemed to Mr. Birtwistle. She seemed to change with bewildering rapidity; a sort of chameleonic salamandrine chimera. One moment she was a little thing which nestled under his arm, the next she was altogether remote—a pure white swan bewitched by some enchantment; tall, icy, shockingly boy-

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ish; a breastless goddess with long, cinnamon legs and semi-shingled hair.

This flat she talks about . . . Lollipop Street . . . was it Lollipop Street? Fifteen A . . .

"Well, pay the taxi-man, Teddy, and let 's book seats."

"I must have been dreaming."

"But how delightfully sedan-chairish!"

"Sedan-chairish?"

"Well, *you* know—periwiggish."

He loved to hear her prattling this fabulous flapdoodle, and yet it made him feel . . . unreal. It scared Mr. Birtwistle, this fleeting feeling of unreality.

After all, I s'pose a flat in Lollipop Street would be quite all—

But he had to give his full attention to the booking-office. He got a box, and they went into the spacious gloaming of the Kinema.

"Is n't it tight-ropeish, looking down on all the people?" she said, while the Superb Orchestral Organ (which, as the program stated, "must have a place in every up-to-date Cinema") struck up a tuneful twiddle which swelled and splurged into

Oh-hold-me-Darkie
Tight!
Oh—ever so!

sort of mulligatawny love-lurch all down Fifth Avenue; and then changed to the piping of angels, birds of paradise, love-birds, humming-birds. . . .

They watched the last lap of the Pathécolor educational snippets—"Mrs. Water-Beetle Paddles to her Pal," and "The Eye of a Newt—Watch it Wink!" (taken with a

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Huss microtelescopic lens), and "The Black-backed Gull Gets Its Own Back."

"But how positively School Nature Studyish!" Leeta sighed. "Oh, here's Harold!"

HAROLD LLOYD
IN
"COLLEGE DAYS"

There was a tendency to clap, down below, which died away.

The film ran smoothly on. The orchestral organ kept pace, doing its level best to rollick when the picture was full of fun, to mumble in trembling *intermezzo* when the "love interest" was getting warm; and altogether doing a musical running patter to the helter-skelter breathlessness of "College Days."

"Is n't Harold a perfect pot-hook? Oh, he's quite too loopy-loo for words, Teddy. Don't you love his li'le college cap and his out-size best tortoiseshell goggles?"

They watched the film for a time.

"Teddy."

"Yes?"

"D' you know . . . what it means to've lost any one . . . in the war?"

"Mm, well, I think I understand."

Pause. She put her little hand in his, so naturally.

"Teddy."

"M-yes, Leeta?"

"I lost . . . some one . . . in the war."

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He turned away from the oblong of light. Harold had just upset a trayful of glasses, plates, and a water-jug.

"Teddy," squeeze of the little hand, "once 'pon a time . . . I married Jack."

A little fright passed through Birtwistle, like a tiny electric shock.

"Eh? Jack? Who 's Jack, Leeta?"

Pause.

"Teddy . . . long time ago, I was Nérédah Leeta Escourt Tuffnell. Oh, but you 're not interested; why should you be?"

"Leeta!"

"Teddy, what . . . I mean, who-joo think I am?"

"Er . . . well, of course, I don't know . . . er . . . much about you, Leeta. Do I? I mean you 've never told me. Have you? Eh?"

"Teddy . . . you did n't think I was . . . oh . . . one of the usual . . . sort? Did you?" A stifled sob.

"My dear girl! How could I?" She nestled closer to him.

"Teddy . . . I 've always meant to tell you—how I came to be . . . all alone," and here she began the history of her escape from Tedding Chervil Vicarage, of her marriage to Captain Fairjohn, of her war-widowhood, and of the years of desolation and disillusionment which followed. Birtwistle listened as in a dream. And when she told of her loneliness, of her struggle to earn a living, of the fat and sallow-faced Apfelbaum, of the helplessness of a well-born, educated girl who does not know where to go in the frantic commercial scramble and has no special qualifications for anything except . . . looking damn-pretty and being simply charming, Mr. Birtwistle wanted to take her in his arms to comfort her. Indeed, the gloom of the

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Kinema swathed the increasing intimacy of attitude in friendly dusk.

"And I could n't go home to the vicarage, Teddy. I knew I 'd be a burden to the poor old daddy-boy, and I could n't do that after all he 'd done for me. I was stranded."

"But you never told me any of this, Leeta."

"But, Teddy, how could I? It would have looked like trying to sponge on your good nature. One must uphold one's pride just a li'le bit. One must try not to be a burden to others." Oh, he loved her for that!

"And then, Teddy, you sat down opposite me, one evening and hummed a snatch of melody from 'Hold It Down'; joo 'member?"

"Yucatan! How could I forget, Leeta? Our first meeting."

"But so . . . so informal, Teddy!"

"Ha, yes! Informal . . . like children. So natural."

Pause.

"No regrets, Teddy?"

"I? Leeta, why d' you ask such a question?"

"Oh-h!" she laughed. "One 's . . . made to ask those sort of questions, somehow."

"I never thought you 'd bother with an old thing like me, Leeta."

"I 'M JUST A REGULAR FELLOW — SO STEP RIGHT UP AND CALL ME 'SPEEDY'!"

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"Oh, is n't that too twidge? 'Step right up and call me "Speedy"!' So perfectly pathetique, and so succinctly ridic'! I am simply laid waste by Harold, Teddy, he 's really funny."

But Mr. Birtwistle had lost the thread of "College Days." It was just a jumble to him. He liked the romantic gloom, and the little illuminated EXIT signs that gave a rosy glow to the mezzotint of the cigarette-smoke-laden atmosphere. Ever and again he caught a glimpse of that loonish face on the screen.

"Teddy . . . I 'm so happy now."

"M'm, dear li'le Leeta!"

"'Wanta make-oo happy, too."

"Ah, you have, you do, Leeta, by Jove!"

"So good to be . . . like this, Teddy."

"Mm. . . ."

"By our two selves."

"Yeah, I know," he whispered.

"That 's why . . . li'le flat, Teddy. So 's we can be just happy." She laid her head against his shoulder. "Hotels are lonely, lonely, lonely places, Teddy . . . nowhere 's so lonely as in a crowd," she said.

"Yeah, I know; I know."

"And I 'd be there waiting for you always, Teddy. Your own li'le Leeta-bird, to make you cozy and comfy."

"Dear thing!" said Teddy, and nearly choked with emotion.

Suddenly she drew away from him. He wanted her to stay, leaning her warm contour of cheek and arm and boyish breastlessness against him.

"But how philomellowy!"

"Eh?"

"Nothing, nothing, nothing. Cobwebs. Dreams.

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Look, Teddy—oh, *do* look! His clothes are all splitting at the seams!"

But Mr. Birtwistle saw nothing. He was dreaming of a little flat, just like Maimie's, where . . . ah, well!

"WHY, YOU'RE ONLY THE COLLEGE BOOB. WE'VE JUST BEEN KIDDING YOU INTO THINKING YOU'RE A REGULAR FELLOW."

Eh? Kidding? Ah, she's perfectly wonderful. Regular fellow. Mm, but she's pure gold right through. Boob. Who's a boob? She does n't know I'm fifty-five. Fifty-five not out, eh? Yeah, not out. Teddy Goodchild, still going strong. Poor kid! Up against the world. Alone. No one. Cah! One does n't know why one's impelled to do this or that. There's a divinity that shapes our ends, eh? 'Course there is. Yucatan. I'm a sort of fairy godfather. In the nick of time. Heh! these highbrows imagine Romance is dead; they think life's drab, dull, nowadays. They don't know. They don't realize the Drama of Life, the Tragedy of it, the Beautiful Human Relationships, the . . . the Pathos.

"Teddy, look! His trousers are coming off!"

"Er . . . trousers?"

She was lighting a cigarette now. The flicker lit her face outlandishly, like the death-mask of some beautiful, laughing, mad Epstein model, carriage paid to hell.

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He was looking forward enormously to to-morrow morning. He would have liked to go off now, this minute, and taken the little flat. Ach, that silly, leering face again! Hum? Oh, very, very funny. Harold Lloyd. College Days. Yeah. . . .

"Teddy, I met such an amusing man the other day."

"Oh?"

"Dodd, his name was."

(Oh, God! Dodd! Harold Lloyd and his College Days whirled into vortic vertigo.)

"Y-you did n't . . . did n't say anything, did you?"

"Say anything?"

"T-to Dodd?"

"I talked to him for about half an hour. Such a dear youth! I do rather adore men with sleeky-sleek black hair that shines."

"But Dodd has n' . . . er . . . where-joo meet him?"

"I met him at the Pillar Box, Teddy."

"The Pillar Box?"

"It 's a li'le duck of a dance-club. Efty-boy brought Dodd along and introduced us. Why, d' you know Mr. Dodd, Teddy?"

"I know *a* Mr. Dodd, yes," said Birtwistle, beginning to recover from his dreadful panic.

"But how coincidental! P'r'aps it 's the same one. Is he tall and dark, and one of these young Poetry Bookshop poets?"

"No. No, it is n't the same one, I 'm afraid," said Birtwistle, trying hard to put a note of genuine disappointment into it.

"Oh, but how frustrating! Mine 's written a whole slim volume of neo-something-or-other poetry bound in

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paper boards—sort of wall-paper. By Richard Dodd. Quite umpishly snick. I rather liked one thing which began:

> "'Yes, all right, Bertha, you disgusting hag, you!
> D' you think dew and dung and buttercups make love?
> Some don't. Nor I.'

"I thought that was quite dithyrambish, in its own way. Oh, look! Speedy's going to play in the big football match! Do watch!"

> "YOU CAN'T PLAY, SPEEDY. YOU'RE ONLY THE WATER-BOY. WE'VE JUST BEEN KIDDING YOU."

Birtwistle read the caption mechanically. A kind of tic douloureux kept his thoughts twitching. The shock of the last few moments had upset him a good deal. He was desperately glad to discover that Leeta's Dodd was a totally different person; and she was not unconscious of his relief.

Boob, eh? Just been kidding you. No, no, no! Kidding yourself, you boob. She does n't *know*. She does n't know *your* Mr. Dodd, see? It's all right. Some other fellow. Same name. Same name, see? Yeah. . . .

"You're very silent, Teddy."

"I am?"

"Deep in thought?"

"No. Oh, no. Sometimes it's good to be silent."

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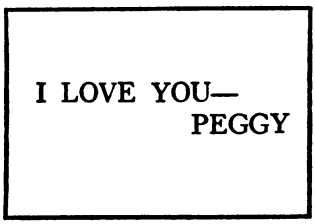
"But how Trappist!"

"Eh?"

The great popular film was nearing its end. Peggy had scribbled her simple message of love and slipped it into Speedy's hand. It flashed upon the screen:



Somehow, that message on the screen comforted Teddy. It was as if Leeta had written those words.

She was near him again now, very near.

She gave him a kiss as light as a dandelion clock that 's blown asunder by a bumblebee's wing.

"Come on, Teddy-boy. Let 's go and find some recherché li'le place to feed."

"Y 'know, Leeta, I enjoyed that film." Mr. Birtwistle had regained his poise.

"So did I, Teddy! It was joy-stick, unalloyed."

Nérédah Leeta, alone at last in her own room at the Parisienne, threw her cedar Ripple Velour coat, trimmed real Kink, over the chair, and flung herself upon the bed.

No Stanislavsky was ever more exhausted by the strain of dramatic interpretation and the subtle interplay of psychic factors truthfully impersonated. It had been entirely successful. Teddy had promised to take the flat. He was even eager to take it. He wanted to have Leeta there, surrounded with nice things. His li'le Leeta-

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bird. . . . And (she was fully conscious of the fact) he would feel much more at ease away from the Parisienne. She did not resent this; she had noted it as a useful lever to be used tactfully at the right moment—and she had used it.

Well, anyhow, she had saved the situation. She would not have to . . . and . . . Teddy is n't so bad. Besides, he had money, whereas Efty-boy and the others had n't a haricot bean. They simply wanted—all they could get; and she knew what that meant, only too well. Even Mr. Apfelbaum had tried. Late one evening, in the show-room. "You gif me keess, yes-no?" Ugh, the fat pig! Oh, Efty-boy was a good sport; good-looking and young, and such a good dancer, but she was n't going to drop to the level of a—oh, why not say it?—a harlot. No, for the sake of Jack's memory she would keep herself from that.

Teddy 's all right. He won't just take me out for a night and then chuck me on the dung-heap. Teddy 's got a heart, the silly old dear. In a way, I 'm fond of Teddy. I feel Jack would n't mind Teddy so much. Besides, what else can I do?

I shall have my own li'le flat, and the old boy 'll be away most of the time. Only every other week or so. Oh, it 's too utterly good to be true. Teddy 's paramour. Mr. Goodchild's mistress, eh? His private inamorata. . . . Well, that 's much better than Efty-boy, and the usual gang, and, in the end—yes—the streets. For a moment a vision of Tedding Chervil came before her eyes: the three great elms and the black barn behind the smithy . . . yellow straw-rick. She heard again the garrulous, chattering charivari of rooks in the rookery at the back of the vicarage. And George, the drink-sodden, gout-

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laden farmer, with the watery eyes and black-and-white check-riding-breeches, who used to leer at her and try to waylay her in the churchyard. All he had wanted was . . . the same as Efty-boy. Thank God, I got away from that! I might even have married the brute if I 'd stayed in the village; anyhow, there was no one else in the place, and he had money. Thank God for Teddy! I can put up with Teddy. He is decent at heart, and he won't let me down.

She got up from the bed and ran across to the dressing-table. She opened her lizard-skin pochette, took out her purse, and counted what money was in it.

"One pound two and five . . . two and tenpence ha'-penny . . . three bob . . . three and six, and half a crown 's six shillings . . . and fourpence. One pound six and four. That 's all—and only three quid left in the bank out of my two hundred pounds and the fifty pounds I got on Teddy 's necklace. Four pounds six and four in the whole blessed world! My stars! what a near squeak!" she said aloud.

She never meant to stay on at the Parisienne, but she had. And this was the end. Well, she had saved the situation at the last moment, by a hair's-breadth.

Teddy had turned out "trumps."

And to-morrow—the li'le flat.

She laughed softly to herself and began to undress.

Teddy Goodchild . . . er . . . Mr. Birtwistle, alone at last in his own room at the Parisienne, threw his cigar into the grate, and flopped into an arm-chair, a crumple of white starched linen and black cloth.

I knew, from the very first moment I set eyes on her, that she was no common sort of girl. Hm, one 's able

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to sense these things. Indefinable something. Breeding. Clergyman's daughter. . . .

And she might have . . . gone under.

One does n't realize how helpless one's fellow-creatures are. Swept hither and thither in the maelstrom of life. Refined, educated, well-bred—and not a soul to whom she could turn for help. Not a soul.

Human sympathy. Understanding. Fate moves in a mysterious way. Poor Leeta. It 's something to be able to help a . . . a girl who 's suffered and struggled as she has. Every heart has some hidden tragedy within, I suppose, if one only knew. We 're masks, outwardly. One passes a thousand *Lady Macbeths* and . . . and *Hamlets* each day, as one goes about one's daily tasks.

Never said a word until to-night. Too proud. I admire that. She 's got grit. And she 's . . . such a damn-pretty girl.

Mr. Birtwistle's conscience, instead of pricking like a thorn in the soul, had taken on the function of a Watt's governor, actuating a throttle-valve upon the emotions, but dependent upon emotional combustion for its own motive power.

Poor Leeta-girl! Married and a widow within a few days. And she looks so young still. So young and so helpless. Mrs. Jack Fairjohn. Leeta, a married woman. A widow. And she never told me. . . .

Somehow or other, for some reason quite unknown to him, Mr. Birtwistle was glad of this astounding revelation; he was glad to know that Leeta was "a married woman." It . . . it put things right, if you understand; it seemed to regularize his position; to wash away the last little smudge of guilt from a perfectly blameless Birtwistle.

I understand just how she must have felt; just why she

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hid it all from me; and I shall stand by her and see that the world does n't suck her down into the depths of . . . of . . . well, of London's shady under-world.

It 's awful to think of her, alone . . . only a few pounds left in the bank . . . widowed . . . husband killed in the war and no one to go to. . . .

Sort of adopted daughter, eh?

He seemed to forget about the visit to Maimie's flat; about the scarlet lips—no, petals—of that exotic maya-flower; about the flashing, flower-pecking sun-birds, and a numb foot.

Ah, well! I s'pose I 'd better get to bed.

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XIV

MR. BIRTWISTLE DRAWS FIVE HUNDRED IN CASH

THE following morning Teddy and Leeta met at Fifteen A Lillipot Street, as arranged.

A little of the moral self-righteousness which had glowed about him the night before was dimmed.

Romance evaporates like methylated spirit. Last night he had felt himself endued with the spirit of a Perseus—Teddy Perseus and Andromeda Leeta—or a Don Quixote; a King Cophetua and the beggar-maid; something of that sort.

And Nérédah Leeta had taken on a prophetic, tragic meaning; as if Destiny had decreed that she should come into his life for some special purpose, like . . . like that picture of "Mrs. Siddons as 'The Tragic Mood,'" with its sprig of Christmas holly, in the hall. Mm, "The Tragic Mood" . . .

Cold daylight spoiled all this chivalric tragedy for Mr. Birtwistle. Besides, it was raining—a quiet patter that made the pavements and the policemen's capes shine like polished metal. It was too early. And this flat business—was n't it a bit hasty? Of course, one would stand by Leeta, but this tearing hurry to take a flat one knew nothing about . . .

He wished he had come in a taxi to the place, instead of walking in all this miserable slush.

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"Coo-ee! Ted-eeh! Here we are—over-heeah!" She was waving to him across the way.

"Oh, there you are," he called back.

"I 've got the key!" she cried. He went over to the doorway, where she was sheltering from the rain and shaking one of those low comedian-like gamps that are sold as smart "Chubby" and "Stumpy" umbrellas, best quality silk cover, bakelite duck's-head handle, 45/6.

"And this is the caretaker, who 'll show us over," she said, turning such a decoying pucker of rose-bud lips (richly incarnadined with lip-stick) toward a little pale-faced man at her side, as would have bird-limed all the angels in heaven.

Mr. Harbin, the caretaker, got it full-face, and it snared him out-of-hand. Mr. Birtwistle had a profile of pink and cream and crimson, with swooping black lashes.

It changed everything. *So!* Never mind the rain—let 's do it again! *Plip!* And when she turned upon him halfway up the stone steps and whispered close to his face, *"Teddy, it 's wijum when we get upstairs!"* his heart, for no reason that he knew of, went all a-flutter, and his wits followed suit like a flock of frightened geese on a Michaelmas morning.

The caretaker man was unlocking a door. They had come to rest, at last, on a wide landing.

The caretaker man had horrid red pimply things on the back of his neck. Mr. Birtwistle could not help seeing them; his eyes would look at them. Ugh! Horrid red pimples . . .

"This is Fifteen A," said Mr. Harbin, leading the way into the hall.

"Furnished!" Teddy exclaimed.

"No, it won't be, will it?" said Leeta.

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"Oh, no, miss, it 's a kinema manager whose lease is up, and 'is things will be gone by to-morrow or the nex' day."

There were photographs, autographed photographs of film stars, everywhere; and the place had a ghostly odoriferousness of whisky, stale cigar-ash, mackintoshes, bay-rum, vulcanite, soot, old leather, socks, Ronuk, cold cream, eau de Cologne, Vinolia shaving-stick, flowered cretonne, dust, and Caron *Narcisse Noir* perfume.

"Teddy! *Do* come and look at the li'le twinklums-twoo of a sitting-room. Is n't it twee?"

It certainly was. The kinema manager, or the kinema manager's . . . er . . . wife, had good taste.

"It 's a nice light room, this one," said Mr. Harbin, but no one took any notice of him.

"Teddy! Come here! There 's a li'le hubbarby-cupboardy jus' behind the door. Is n't that wij? I sha'n't have those horrid, stoopid, dark-blue curtains at the windows, Teddy. I shall get some sort of 'trancing lemony-yellow and angelica green, cheeky-piquey fadeless check-check. . . . Such a Puddle-Duck of bath-room, Teddy! *Do* look!"

It was quite impossible not to be infected by her charming naïveté.

"And, Teddy, I *can* get one of those roly-poly pouffe-things so 's to sit on the floor, can't I?"

"Poof?" said Birtwistle, blankly.

"A dumpy, *you* know!"

"Dumpy?"

"Humpy-dumpy cushiony-thing, to sit on," she laughed. "I simply must have one in here, Teddy."

"Anything you like, my dear," said Teddy, and went to look at a bedroom.

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"There 's two bedrooms, sir," said Mr. Harbin. "This one is the largest."

"Er . . . d' you know anything about the financial side? Is there a premium?" asked Mr. Birtwistle. Leeta had gone back to look at the sitting-room again. Mr. Birtwistle took the opportunity of a word of two with this caretaker fellow. He felt he was getting to grips, at last, with a situation which had the quality of whipped white of egg.

"Yes, sir, it 's three 'undred, sir, for immediate possession."

"Hm, three hundred," repeated Birtwistle, meditatively.

"It 's a nice little place," said Mr. Harbin. "Be snapped up in a moment."

"What about service? Is there any service?"

"Yes, sir. There 's Mrs. Harbin does for two other flats in the buildin', sir."

"Oh . . ." Three hundred. Bit of a lump sum, but he was disposed to be generous. Leeta was close to him again.

"The premium 's three hundred for immediate possession, Teddy, and it 'll be snapped up in no time." She looked at Mr. Harbin for confirmation.

"If you was n't to take it now," he said, "it'ud be gorne by midday to-day."

"There! D' you hear what he says, Teddy? It 'll be gone if we don't clinch it at once."

"Mm, well, it 's a nice little flat."

"Was n't I clever to find it? Did n't I say you 'd want it 'meejitly you saw it?"

This was like some fell contagion. He knew he was catching her eagerness; she was so infectiously intimate. Besides, she took it for granted that the flat was taken.

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In one way, he was rather pleased with the idea, himself. Three hundred premium. H'm. Still, things have been pretty good. Yes. Pretty good day, yesterday. Message from his brokers. With M'Bongos up ten points he stood to make quite a little haul.

"So, it 's all settled, is n't it?" she was saying.

"Er . . . yes, I think so."

She clapped her hands for joy.

"Can I 'phone Mr. Ragg and fix it now?" she asked.

"Anything you like," he answered.

"You can use the 'phone downstairs, miss, in the 'all," said Mr. Harpin.

"Oh, Teddums, you are a dear old Jeroosalumsartichokeums!" she whispered. "Just *think* what it 'll be like when I get it all nice and cozy-wozy for you! I do so want to have bright-yellow paint, Teddy—you know, sort of cowslip color—can I?"

"Anything you like, my dear," he repeated. "Only, ah, it had better be done in your name, all this, Leeta. I mean don't mention me, see?"

"Right-o, Teddy!" she called.

Then she ran down to ring up Randolph & Ragg.

She was with him again in a few moments, before he had time to recover from the shock of his decision. His mind had run back to the building of Orchard Leigh. That had been quite different. Building Orchard Leigh was like digging the foundations of something enduring, but this flat was so high up—he stared down at the futurist view of concatenating chimney-pots, out of the sitting-room window—so high up that it was like a castle in the air, an idle fancy . . . *château en Espagne.*

". . . and every modern convenience," Mr. Harbin was saying.

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As for Nérédah Leeta, that little thrill which comes as easily to the unvirtuous as to the virtuous—the thrill of home-making for the first time—filled her with a new delight and lent her an added spell of witchery.

The fact that Teddy was not her husband did not enter into it. She was a woman and he was a man, and they were home-making. She was back to the primitive core of things: Woman and Man making a shelter.

"And, Teddy, I do so want to get a loungy-poungy settee-thing to put along here, facing the fireplace . . . ?"

"Anything you like, my dear," said Mr. Birtwistle. She was annoyed, for the millionth part of a second, at his lack of interest. Leeta would have liked more enthusiasm, but Mr. Birtwistle's business acumen was breaking through this cloud-cuckoo-land of wijum pouffes and li'le dinkums Chinese Powder Blue tea-sets. He realized that there was no getting out of this transaction; that he had "clinched" it; that Leeta had 'phoned through and "fixed it up,"—that he had taken Fifteen A Lillipot Street, and that there was a premium of £300 to pay to Messrs. Randolph & Ragg for immediate possession.

For one crazy, paroxysmal, panic-stricken sixtieth part of a minute, Mr. Birtwistle contemplated a dash downstairs for the call-box—what 's the number? Stop it . . . cancel it . . . all off . . . no good . . . have n't decided . . . no . . . eh?

"Teddy, it 's so perfectly lovely to know it 's all settled. Our wij of a li'le flaticums!"

It was all over now. No use struggling. And, after all, was n't it rather fun? 'Course it was! Eh? Yes. Leap in the dark. Taken a flat. Well I 'm bothered—still, why not? Besides, there 's Leeta to think of. One had to do something to help the poor girl.

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"Teddy, what time 's that meeting of yours?"

"Ten-thirty at the Cannon Street Hotel," said Teddy, taking out his watch hurriedly. "By Jove, Leeta! it 's five past ten now!"

"About the premium, Teddy?"

That was the difficulty. Birtwistle saw the difficulty quite well. As a matter of fact, so did Leeta.

"If I write you a ch . . . er . . . No, no, no. H'm. See now . . ."

A check would bear his real name upon it; indorsed "Godwin Birtwistle," in that great, sprawling signature of his.

Can't sign myself "Edward Goodchild" on a check. No. And even if I could . . . give the show away. I 'm still Teddy Goodchild to Leeta, and, maybe it 's all for the best.

"Perhaps it would make things easier for you, Leeta, if I drew it out in cash, eh? Then you can run round to Randolph and Ragg and settle it right away, see?"

Leeta agreed that cash would be much easier for her, "'Cos, of course, there 's furniture and things to get, Teddy."

"Yes, I was just thinking of that; only I must get away for this meeting. Look here, if I get five hundred pounds in notes, will you fix it up with these agents and get the furniture and everything? I 've got to get the two-nineteen back from Euston to-day—I have n't a moment to spare—so I sha'n't see you . . . till next time."

"Right you are! I 'll do just what you say. It 's all for you, Teddy; so 's you can have a boo'f'l li'le flat to come to, instead of a horrid old hotel."

Five hundred in cash. Three for the premium, and

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two for furnishing. Yes. He would write a check on "self" for £500 when he got to his bank.

Birtwistle's mind kept running over the amount. Five hundred. Three hundred premium. Still . . . no getting out of it, now. It 'll be very jolly to have one's own little *pied à terre*. Yes . . . and Leeta. Much more convenient. Makes things so difficult in a hotel if . . . if one happens to have a fellow like Dodd, or any one, with one. Nice to get away from . . . hotels.

They took a taxi to Birtwistle's bank. Mr. Birtwistle, under normal conditions, was no fool where money was concerned. It was Birtwistle who, more than any one else, had steered the firm of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co. Ltd. over the mud-banks and shallows of post-war trade depressions, through economy campaigns, via Wembley, better trade outlooks, and "Buy British," to the "New Spirit in Industry" period. Yes, but this was not a normal situation. Just as his perfectly sound common sense, his commercial perspicacity, began to recover consciousness, as from the effects of some elfin anodyne; just as his business astuteness began to see a blur of daylight and to hear the clink of metal and glass on the dentist's tray, so to speak; it was "put to sleep" again by—by a dainty gloved hand squeezing his knee, by a thistledown kiss behind his ear, and by the ephemeral but ever-recurring fragrance of . . . *Quelques Fleurs?* . . . no, of Piver's *Trèfle Incarnate.*

"Teddy," she said, "it 's going to be *such* fun getting the dinkums li'le flat ready for you!"

The taxi drew up at the bank.

"I 'm going to nip in," said Mr. Birtwistle, "cash a check, and then I 'll come back. You wait here for me, see?"

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"Rightie-o, Teddums. I 'll watch the tick-tick go one-and-six, one-and-nine, two-bob. Do be quick, Teddy! I just loathe the suspense of waiting, and I 'm all of a dither this morning, 'cos it *is* so exciting!"

Teddy was gone but a few minutes; to Leeta, lolling in the taxi, it seemed ages.

"Well, that 's all right," he said.

"Teddy, I thought you were never coming!"

But Teddy was much too occupied in his mind to reply. He was bothered about what to do with Leeta and the taxi, and how to get away quickly to his meeting at the Cannon Street Hotel, for which he was bound to be late. He did not wish to hand the notes to her in front of the bank and then walk off; it might look queer if any one happened to notice. And he wished to avoid being seen with her in the City. One might run into business acquaintances . . . never know. And he particularly wished to avoid being seen with her at the agents. One never knows how things leak out.

"Looghere, Leeta," he said, his mind suddenly clear again, "you drive right away to Randolph and Ragg and fix it up with them; you can drop me at the bottom of Aldwych, see?" She nodded. He gave instructions to the driver, and got in.

"Well, now, here 's the five hundred in cash, Leeta," and he handed her a long, fat envelop. "Don't lose it, will you?"

"Trust me, Teddy!" she laughed, and gave him a hug. Mr. Birtwistle despised himself for the little pang of avaricious regret which came upon him as he handed her the money.

The taxi slowed and stopped. Mr. Birtwistle hopped out. He caught a glimpse of kink collar, white neck, pure

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French silk hose (openwork clocks) in peach, just the tip-toe of a lizard-skin shoe, a whiffle of cigarette-smoke, that dangling, dainty posy-motif, cluster-shaded, felt-and-silk fruit (in pelican pink, caterpillar green, Lilliputian yellow), a little kiss blown to him on the tips of the fingers of a white doeskin glove—*plip!*—and, *flick!*—the comic beak of the bakelite duck's head on the chubby umbrella nodding at the taxi window—and then . . . just Aldwych, and the offensive vapors of petrol engine exhaust.

He stood for a moment or two looking after the taxi which was carrying Leeta away. In his imagination he saw her going to the agents, handing over the money (he had again impressed upon her that the flat was to be taken in her name and that . . . that Mr. Goodchild's name was not to be mentioned), and then he saw her going off to Waring & Gillows, or Heal & Sons, or somewhere, to get "all the dinkums li'le things that 'll makums all tea-cozy-ish." Well, she was very happy.

Fortunately for Birtwistle, his imagination was not a very vivid one.

Without more ado he hailed a passing taxi and told the man to "drive like the devil" to the Cannon Street Hotel. Mr. Birtwistle did detest being late for a business engagement. Besides, there was the board meeting at Norvic house at 11:45.

Mr. Birtwistle pulled himself together, took out certain papers, and gave his mind to the business he was about to conduct at the Cannon Street Hotel. He was glad to dismiss the . . . the, ah, disturbing feminine influence . . . and get down to business.

Ah-h'umph! Yes.

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XV

MR. BIRTWISTLE'S *PIED À TERRE*

IN the train (he got the 2:19 from Euston) it began to dawn upon him.

Cost lot of money to furnish Orchard Leigh, pre-war days. Wonder how she 'll manage it on £200? . . . After all, I s'pose one ought to be able to do pretty well on that?

He tried to recall furniture prices. Ought to be able to get quite a good bed—er . . . single bed—for about £3 10s. od., or so. Then, of course, there 's sheets, pillows . . . ah . . . h'm . . .

His mind switched to arm-chairs. Price of arm-chairs, now? Ought to get quite a comfortable arm-chair for, say, £3. Could one? £3 or £4, he thought. He was now quite interested in the furnishing of the flat.

He began to think of it not as *her* flat, but as *his* flat; fondly caressing the phrase *pied à terre.*

His eyes glanced down the head-lines of the "Evening Standard." With an appalling jolt he came upon:

CITY MAN LEADS
DOUBLE LIFE

SCENE IN LONDON FLAT

Then he read:

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"An astounding domestic entanglement was revealed yesterday in the Bankruptcy Court when Mr. B. J. Hollingwood-Skeer, of Skeer & Pirtle, the well-known city firm, who has recently filed a petition . . . total liabilities being calculated at something over £23,000 and assets £56. Miss Irene Symms, who was engaged as private secretary to Mr. Hollingwood-Skeer in 1924, stated in answer to Sir Baldock Evans, who appeared for the prosecution, that on April 3d last she accompanied Mr. Hollingwood-Skeer on a week-end visit to Brighton, where they stayed at the Hotel Metropole . . ."

Mr. Birtwistle, having recovered from his first head-line-shock, said: Ach! Bankruptcy—disgraceful! Disgraceful thing—a man who does n't honor his obligations. Shady business altogether—these city men who go bankrupt. The first duty of a decent citizen is to honor his monetary obligations. Man who tries to evade that . . . disgraceful thing. Like Bolshevik Russia.

The commercial integrity of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd, & Co. Ltd., lifted Mr. Birtwistle upon a tidal wave of righteous indignation against the disreputable financial condition of Mr. B. J. Hollingwood-Skeer, and made him swell with honest pride at the thought of the Community-Service and the Good-will between employers and employed which had always existed . . . Yes. (Except, of course, for one or two little strikes and other troubles.) In his determination to ignore Miss Irene Symms and the rest of the story, Mr. Birtwistle was impelled to take out his leather wallet in which he kept his Treasury notes, and to read again a little card issued by the local Rotarians, which read:

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THE BUSY MAN'S CREED

I believe in the stuff I am handing out, in the firm I am working for; and in my ability to get results. I believe that honest stuff can be passed out to honest men by honest methods. I believe in courtesy, in kindness, in generosity, in good cheer, in friendship and in honest competition. I believe there is something doing, somewhere, for every man ready to do it. I believe I'm ready—RIGHT NOW.

If only there was more of that spirit in the world, Birtwistle's heart sang, how much better, and freer and nobler, and . . . well . . . better altogether it would be. That little Rotarian card had cheered him before now. It had cheered him when the Block, Roller and Stamp Cutters had struck for six weeks for an extra sixpence and got it.

Nevertheless, the sexual entanglements revealed under the heading "City Man Leads Double Life," had sunk into the back of Mr. Birtwistle's mind, in spite of the narcotic comfort of "The Busy Man's Creed."

The pride of his commercial integrity suddenly went out of him when he saw Orchard Leigh and realized that he was approaching, not his house, but one of his homes.

Mr. Birtwistle kissed his wife self-consciously.

Perhaps for the first time in his life he pretended to be more tired than he was. Ettie responded with delight.

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Almost ashamed at his own over-acting he shuffled into the hall, and to Ettie's unvaried query, "Is that you, Father? You must be *so* tired!" made so weak and mournful a reply that she became alarmed.

"Fact is, Ettie . . . very heavy day. Rush. One long rush. First one meeting, then another. Ticklish business about a report. I *am* a bit fagged. I feel it."

He was enabled to sink into his old arm-chair by the fire in an atmosphere of awed quiet, broken only by Ettie's anxious inquiries and urgent pleadings that he should go to bed at once.

Mr. Birtwistle muttered something about "Better presently, my dear," and set himself resolutely to overcome the ghastly feeling that he was guilty of duplicity.

Slowly but surely London faded into the background of his stream of thought; the atmosphere of Orchard Leigh reasserted its sway, and a merciful anæsthesia dulled and finally overcame his conscience.

Mr. Birtwistle was at home.

"Better, Godwin?" Ettie asked.

"Better now, Ettie," he replied.

The attack was over.

During the next few days Birtwistle was kept very busy at the office and had little time to think of anything but Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co. Ltd.

All that had happened in London during his last visit seemed like a dream; a dream that was difficult to recapture in the hum-drum routine of *ump-clank-fump!*

Surely he had n't taken a flat . . . ?

He sipped his glass of milk.

Surely not. A little flat in London? Queer . . . He crumpled a piece of saffron yellow Madeira cake. Five yellow crumbs fell into the fender.

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Although common sense told him that he had indeed taken a flat in London, a pathetic and childlike desire to stand well with himself made him thrust the realization into the limberlost of the mind the moment it cropped up.

He gulped the last of his glass of milk—*clink!*—and rang for Miss Greenhalgh.

"Er . . . I think I 'll go through all those papers from Cossett, and see what that quotation from Rowletts actually was. It might come up at the next meeting. Useful to know exactly what the figures were."

He plunged into the Busy's Man's refuge from reality.

"Mummy 's not well, Daddy."

"Eh?"

"She thinks she must have got a bit of a chill, or something, at the Conservative Fête last week."

"Not in bed, is she?"

"Well, she thought she 'd better. She was feeling so rotten."

"M'm . . . poor old Ettie. Go up and see her."

It was not serious. Ettie was obviously what is called "thoroughly run down," and the fête had been the last straw. She looked tired and pale, and her legs ached. Some sort of " 'flu."

It seemed odd, rather, to come home from the office and find Ettie not about. Felt as if there were a gap, or something vanished into . . . into nothingness. So strange to be greeted with Hermione's casual shout from upstairs:

"That you, Daddy? I 'm having a bath. *Do* see what 's wrong with Gruff; he keeps whining. P'r'aps his chain 's got all twisted."

So tired Father had to go out again and see to Gruff. It was very different. No one to kiss. No one to take his

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coat and hat and scarf. It was all so empty. He had to go and forage for his slippers in the hall cupboard. He could n't find them.

"What 's that, Daddy? Oh, slippers. I 'm blest if I know where they are. Have a look under the stairs by the kitchen door." Not helpful. Yes, he missed Ettie. He wanted Ettie. It was dull without Ettie. He had never realized that before. Ettie made all the difference.

Ettie stayed in bed for five days "to get quite well," and Godwin found the third evening without Ettie extraordinarily dull. Hermione was out with Harry. Mr. Birtwistle did not know what to do with himself. He even became peevish.

Silly to stay in bed when one is n't ill. H'm. He was dreadfully bored. There was no one to fuss over him and pamper him. He had mislaid his tobacco-pouch. Most annoying. Whole place is disorganized with Ettie in bed.

Mr. Birtwistle wanted to be "tired Father" and there was no one to inquire after him. He went into his study and said: "Damn! Fed up wandering about. Oh, *there* it is, under that thing . . ."

Ettie, on the other hand, was missing all the little duties which she loved so well. She longed to be in the hall to take his hat and coat and scarf. She fretted when she heard him searching about for his slippers, *"They 're in the hall cupboard on the second shelf, Hermione!"* she called, but her voice did not carry with the door shut. Yes, Ettie was delighted to find her prodigal tired husband returned. She wanted him like that.

Quite unconsciously, Orchard Leigh had been organized for a tired man—not for a tired woman. True, she had been inspired and uplifted by that resurgent youthfulness which had come to its climax on Christmas Eve, but she

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was silently glad to slip back into the domestic tradition she knew so well.

Mr. Birtwistle whole semi-subconscious objection to that tradition had been that he was being made into an old man before his time. The chance utterance of Ponce and Hardwick at the golf-club had opened his eyes to the way in which he had always acquiesced in playing the rôle of tired Father. Yet here he was, mooching about with a long face simply because there was no one to . . . well, to talk to . . . or anything.

He imagined he resented the lack of life about the place, but the real thing that irritated him was a change in the routine of Orchard Leigh which he had not brought about. Ettie in bed. Not really ill at all. Does good to have a rest, of course, but . . . overdoing it.

Even when she was downstairs again, quite well, he was moody. He was bored with her. He did not acknowledge it, of course, but he was.

He found himself looking forward again eagerly to the next board meeting in London.

As the days drew on he caught himself getting rather absurdly excited. The castle in the air began to take shape in his mind. What *has* Leeta done. Wonder if she got that pouffe thing to sit on? . . . Settee. Curtains.

He could not help thinking about it, and wondering what quaint cozinesses Leeta might have in store for him. He was curious to see his little flat in London, and to . . . talk to some one who . . . understands.

The day before he was due to go, Orchard Leigh and Ettie seemed to get on his nerves. There was a revulsion of feeling towards Ettie.

Can't make it out. Can't make it out. Don't under-

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stand why I said that to her. Snappy. Rude. Disgracefully rude. Rude to Ettie.

He realized that he had not been kind to her these last few days, and he wished he had. In fact, he had been very unkind. Sharp-tongued, once or twice. He hated himself for it, but in spite of this self-accusation he still found her dull. Just dull.

The following day he kissed her very tenderly before his departure for London, but deep down in the inaccessible core of his heart he was glad to get away. It shocked him dreadfully to find how glad he was to get away.

Arrived in London he took a taxi, as usual, to the Hotel Parisienne. It never occurred to him to go to his own flat. Of course, he meant to go round soon and see it; yes, he was looking forward to that, but it never struck him that it was there for him to inhabit. By some trick of the mind he regarded it as he had regarded Maimie's flat: a cozy little place where one could be alone with Leeta for . . . for a whole day if only one had the time.

And then Leeta strolled in. She had come to see if there was any sign of him there, and she discovered him just lighting his pipe.

"But, Teddy," she said, rather sadly, "I 've been expecting you! What 've you come here for?"

"Well, ah . . ."

"You have n't had dinner?"

He had.

"Ah . . . well," he said.

"But how devastating. I 've got a snug li'le dinner all ready for you, you silly old thing!"

"Fact is . . . I never thought!" and it astonished him now to find that it had never entered his mind to go direct

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to his own flat where Leeta was waiting for him, expecting him.

Leeta was disappointed. She had been hoping the "snug li'le dinner" would make it easier to break the news that—well, that the £200 had n't gone very far, and that she had simply *had* to run over that amount, and spend another £150, what with extra furnishing and having to redeem the necklace in case Teddy should ask awkward questions. Things are so frightfully 'spensive, Teddy.

However, her plans for the little dinner had gone awry.

"Teddy, you must cancel your room here."

"Er . . . yes. Yes, of course I will. Fact is, Leeta, I had n't thought out . . . all the possibilities of . . . of the . . . of having a *pied à terre* of one's own!" he laughed nervously.

He was able to cancel his room at the Parisienne without much ado, and before long he was with Leeta in his own flat at Fifteen A Lillipot Street.

She ran up in front of him to open the door.

"Joo manage to get that pouffe-thing?" he called.

"Oh, Teddlums, I got such a pouffe of a pouffe! Do come and see it! It *was* such fun getting things! Even now I 've nowhere near finished."

"Goodness me! Why, it 's a different flat altogether."

"Like it, Teddy?"

"By Jove, Leeta, you have made a difference!"

"Like the cowslip-yellow paint?"

"Very jolly! oh, very jolly! So bright."

"Come in and take ums things off—and can't I have one li'le kiss, Teddy?"

It was good to have some one to take his coat and his hat and his scarf from him. He liked that.

"Tired, Teddy?" He liked that too.

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"Not a bit. No."

"Not too tired to come and be shown everything, from the li'le Japanese miniature garden in its boo'ful blue bowl to the wij of a settee that's covered in palest gray-velvet cord? Oh, and you *must* come and see the sort of study-bedroom I 've made for you. Such a podge of a li'le arm-chair so's you can sit and read in your 'jamas if you want to."

Just for one second his conscience gave a wriggle of discomfort. Ought one to be here? Ought one to do this? Ought . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . and then it was lulled to sleep again by the irresistible drug of Nérédah Leeta's cascade of delight; her trill of adventurous anecdote about going to Heal & Sons' and Waring's and Hampton's; and the nearness of her presence.

Leeta took him on a tour of inspection.

As his uneasy conscience succumbed, his business sagacity came awake.

Carpet—rather nice carpet—not less than £12 12s. od. Two arm-chairs—say £8 or so. That's £20. Table, sort of Heal's Monks' table—£16 10s. od., eh? That's £27 2s. od. Then the pouffe, what?—£3 3s. od., or thereabouts—and so on.

Mr. Birtwistle of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co. Ltd. valued each item as Leeta conducted him through the rooms. He rather hated himself for doing it, but some automatic calculator, some ready reckoner of the mind went adding on: £156 odd, somewhere about £156—£209 £250—£258—£300 or so . . .

At last she led him back to the sitting-room.

She sat him down amidst the black-and-gold cushions on the gray cord-covered settee in front of the fire.

"Well, Teddy, what-choo think of it?"

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He leaned back and took her hand. What he was really thinking was: can't have cost less than, say, £500. How on earth has she managed it? But he said:

"I think it 's all just perfect, Leeta. Quite perfect."

She came and sat down next to him.

"Teddy, will you be very, very, very angry?"

"Eh?"

"Teddy, it had to be nice for *you*."

"Well it is nice. It 's . . . ah . . . awfully nice, Leeta."

"But, Teddy, things are so frightfully 'spensive."

"I know. I can't think how you 've managed it."

"Teddy, I was n't 'stravagant. I kept saying: Now, do be careful; don't spend much on *your* li'le room; take care to get everything nice for Teddy-boy, see?"

"You 're a wonder, Leeta. How-joo do it?"

"Well, that 's what I did, Teddy. I spent hardly anything on my little bedroom, 'cos I thought: Well, anyhow, if I *do* have to run over the two hundred pounds it shall be on Teddy's li'le flat and not on Leeta's 'stravagance."

"Ha! I see," said Teddy.

"You saw how plain and . . . and inexpensive everything was in my li'le pokums-den, did n't you? I only got the absloot bare necessities. But I had to have everything nice for *you*, Teddy-boy, did n't I?"

"Ha! M'm. Yes. Eh? Ha!"

"So you won't be angry, will you?"

"Eh, angry?"

"'Cos, of course, two hundred pounds did n't go very far."

"Er . . . you . . . spent more than . . . than that?"

"Well, Teddy, I 've *explained* why it was, have n't I?

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I did try to make it nice for you. You 've no idea what a lot of time it 's taken to get it all cozyish and snuggly. Everywhere I went I said: Now will Teddy like that? Is it good 'nuf for my Teddlums?"

"So . . . so how much more did it come to?"

"'S far's I can tell you offhand, about another one hundred and fifty pounds, Teddy. I tried hard to keep it down, and as I say, I have n't spent one penny of that on little me, have I?"

"Ha! No. Oh, no. Still . . . Hum. One hundred and fifty pounds—that 's three hundred and fifty pounds for furniture, eh?"

"Well, furniture and other things—I had to get linen and things. And a li'le 'lectric kettle for making early-morning tea. Such a lot of small things that one can't do without. Say I 've been a good girl, Teddy?"

"You have, Leeta. It 's all splendid. I can't think how you did it."

At the same time Mr. Birtwistle's commercial instincts told him that this was all out of order. It had never entered his head that Leeta might run over the £200.

Still, I should have thought £500 was nearer the mark. Not at all bad for £350, really. Not at all bad.

"You 're not a bit angry with me, Teddy?"

"Not one little bit," he told her.

He rather wished it had not happened, all the same.

The first conscientious qualms in which Mr. Birtwistle had stared at himself aghast for having slid into this little affair, and the shock of finding himself in possession of two separate establishments, with Ettie in one and Leeta in the other, seemed to die away quite naturally, as the

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sharp twinge of a wasp's sting soon fades out. It really was very cozy here in his own flat in town. Very cozy.

He liked the general color scheme of cowslip yellow and smudge gray which Leeta had arranged so artistically. So restful.

Now that it was an accomplished fact, he liked the idea of having a flat of his own.

He was very happy.

"Is it as ninkums as Maimie's, Teddy?"

"Oh, it 's much nicer than Maimie's."

"Weally mean it, Teddums?"

"Oh, much!"

"I 'm so glad . . ."

After that things tended to fade into each other in dissolvent confusion. Cool finger-tips across his forehead, sweeping slowly over the head. Leeta's cool white hands.

"Happy, Teddy-boy?"

But he was much too happy to reply. His senses seemed to swoon into a rhythmic blissfulness in which the dwarf *chabo* tree, the wee bridge, the funny celluloid ducks, the tiny Japanese man with the big round hat, and the comic little temple-sort-of-building sitting on a stone (Miniature Jap Garden with Bowl, £4 15 s. 0 d., Liberty & Co.) enlarged themselves foolishly. The brightly painted celluloid ducks puffed themselves out and flew up from their looking-glass lake, hovering higher and higher above the wooden bridge to the temple of . . . of Love . . . and then, changing into Burmese sun-birds carved in red sandalwood, they dived downward to the scarlet petals—no, lips!—of . . . of the *ga-ga* futurist flowers on the pouffe, in handsome brocade (a variety of other designs) piped gold: £3 3 s. 0 d.

The humming-birds were softly humming:

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"Canned kisses!
That 's what—
I want—
Ethelbert!"

And then she sighed.

Again? Yes, again.

Very regrettable.

Very regrettable.

One seems to be . . . carried away. H'm. One knows one 's done wrong and yet . . .

Still, I do'no'. We 're only human, I s'pose. We 're not gods. Pity . . . Pity one is n't able to withstand temptation. P'r'aps it does n't matter.

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XVI

MR. BIRTWISTLE LEADS A DOUBLE LIFE

HERMIONE ran to answer the telephone.

The Orchard Leigh telephone stood in an alcove in the hall, the hall that Mr. Birtwistle had planned out himself (with the help of Scoresby the architect).

"Hallo?"

"That you, 'Mione?"

"Yes, Daddy."

("Is that Father on the 'phone?" Ettie called.)

"As your mo—ask Ettie to come and speak to me. How's 'Mione, eh?"

"Oh, quite tiz, Daddy.—Mummy! Daddy wants you on the 'phone.—Hang on, Daddy."

"Yes, dear? Ettie speaking."

"My dear, I may not get back till Monday."

"Not till Monday, Godwin!"

"I may travel up Sunday night. Not sure. Fact is, my dear, I find this continual traveling up and down more of a . . . a strain than I thought."

"Well, *do* take care, Godwin!"

"Somehow, these long train journeys—"

"That's just what I've always said, Godwin."

"And then having to rush about to see people as well as attending the board—"

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"It 's much too much for you, Godwin."

"So I think I had better take it a bit easy. These last few visits . . . er . . . seem to have tired me out."

"Much better to stay and rest, Godwin. Can't you stay in bed?"

"Er . . . bed? Well, no. No, I'm better up. Much better."

"Are you at the Euston Court, Godwin?"

"Er . . . no. No—"

"I mean you 're staying at the Euston Court?"

"Er, well . . . yes. Oh yes. Of course. At least . . . yes. Well, why d' you ask?"

"Because it would do you such a lot of good to stay quietly in bed just for half a day, Godwin. You 'd feel so much more able to stand the long train journey home. *Must* you keep going up to London like this?"

"Oo, it 's . . . er . . . quite all right if I take things easy, Ettie. I knew you 'd understand."

"Yes, do. And *do* have a rest if you can, Godwin. Don't rush about."

"Right you are, Ettie. How 's Ettie, eh? And Gruff and everybody? That 's good. Well, g'bye. See you Monday. G'bye, Ettie." *Ting.*

There was not the slightest sense of deception in Birtwistle's heart when he rang up Ettie to explain his delay in London. He really did feel a bit fagged out; and as he heard himself describing this overstrain to his wife he felt positively drooping, wilting.

Leeta had said: "Teddy, need you go back? Why not stay with li'le Leeta-bird over the week-end for once?" and Teddy had replied, "No, no, I really must get back, Leeta," but even as he said it he felt another strand of

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moral fiber giving way and he knew he would not catch that train at Euston. "You know, Leeta," he said, when he had climbed the stairs again from the call-box down below, "I don't feel like facing that long journey to the North, somehow."

"Well, need you, Teddy? Can't you go on Sunday night, or Monday? You're tired, you know. You've had a pretty busy day I expect; have n't you?"

"Tell you the truth, Leeta, I have. Had to rush off to see a fellow about some new plant for our factories, and then back to Norvic House for a conference. . . . It's too much."

"'Course it is, Teddy. Stay here and rest your li'le self."

He flopped into an arm-chair. He felt for his pipe, looked at it, and put it away again.

It had fallen to Mr. Birtwistle to make a speech at the conference at Norvic House. He had made it. He had done his best, but he could not help feeling that it had not "got home." It had been a poor, tumbling, jumbled speech. It had been flat. It had fallen flat. It was a little speech which should have prepared the ground for a rather tricky scheme which he had been wanting to launch for some time. He knew three of the directors were dead set against his scheme. In their opinion it was a scheme which, if it went through, would give Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co., Ltd., a very large say in matters; an influence altogether out of proportion. They were perfectly right. But his little speech was meant to be neatly convincing in a friendly but dignified tone. And it had fallen flat. Flat as a pancake.

He had known when he arrived at Norvic House that he was not "in form." He had not that feeling of confi-

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dent commercial candor so necessary on these ticklish occasions. Pity. Great pity.

He needed Leeta's soothing influence.

Orchard Leigh was a long way away, and he was glad to be able to go back to Fifteen A Lillipot Street.

It was rather a pathetic Birtwistle who sat staring at the miniature Japanese garden in the blue bowl.

"Teddy?"

"Yeah . . . what, Leeta?"

"Let 's go to the Madcap Noodles at the Troc to-night, shall we?"

Anything to forget about that speech.

One day Leeta said, "Teddy, I do just adore that new nickity-pickity pattern." They had passed a young man near Oxford Circus clad in the very latest spring suitings for men.

"Is n't it a bit—loud?"

"Simply bellowing!"

"You really like it, Leeta?"

"I think it 's too tiz to be true, Teddy. So haberdashingly heroic!" ("Tiz"? "Tiz"? Where had he heard that word "tiz" before?)

The particular cloth of which the young man's suit was made was a mixture of marzipan and brown-madder woven in a dizzy naughts-and-crosses design, with a do-dot-an-i dazzle running through it.

"But for a man?"

"Of course. Why not? Besides, it 's so assassinatingly *outré,* so perilously *ne plus ultra,* so neo-neo, if you know what I mean."

"H'm, well . . . s'pose I 'm a bit old-fashioned."

"Completely archaic, Teddy!"

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Mr. Birtwistle settled into a period of quiet exhilaration. His conscience had ceased to trouble him. He accepted his double life as a *fait accompli* without questionings, forebodings, or regrets. It was all very pleasant, and very extraordinary; and also it all turned out to be so very much easier than he could have imagined. No hitch anywhere.

He went back to Orchard Leigh and found it all ready for tired Father. He liked that.

He went back to his flat in London and found Leeta always young, and fresh, and "swish," and *chic*, and vitalistic. And he liked that.

Ettie understood so well that he must have a day or so's rest in London in between the long, weary train journeys; and Leeta understood so well how to please him after a week or two of Dodd, Pertwee, Cossett, Miss Greenhalgh, Orchard Leigh and Norvic House.

True, Leeta was a little bit expensive. She ran up several bills to the extent of a further £205 before she had been in the flat three weeks. But still . . . such a damn-pretty girl.

The invigorating effect which had come as such a surprising afterglow to a rather reprehensible indiscretion settled into a hearty embonpoint of the soul. This curious uplift had already quickened into life many who would never know how such a vitalization was first generated. It had brought a sunny glow into Orchard Leigh. It had semi-shingled his wife and daughter. It had brought profit to "Clotilde." It had purchased a li'le black elephant on an ivory hoop. It had enlivened the office, and made Miss Greenhalgh glad. It had put a sunny bedroom out of commission, unfrozen sink-pipes, put on comic nose-and-spectacles, burned up rubbish, kindled a hundred

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and one kisses, and saved the daughter of a country vicar from London's under-world. It had nested itself in Lilliput Street. It had thrust its joyous purchasing power into Waring's, Hapton's, Marshall's, Heal's, Selfridge's, Swan & Edgar's, etc., and it had ousted Ovaltine and a Monster Thermos from his suit-case. It had even encouraged Ethel to go and get herself bobbed! ("I don't like servants with bobbed hair, but still . . ." said Ettie). It had taken a rope of pearls from New Bond Street and put them round a graceful, swan-like neck. It had revealed a daughter to her father, a wife to her husband, and swept away "that tired feeling." It had invented an old schoolfellow with lumbago, and spawned forth a regular cuckoo-froth of other fabrications, falsehoods, and excuses.

It had done these and many other wonders, and now it reclothed Mr. Birtwistle himself.

"And you 'll have the usual dark-gray cloth, sir, I presume?"

"Er . . . no. No. I want . . . something different."

For years Mr. Birtwistle had ordered "the usual dark-gray cloth." If Conduit Street itself had fallen into a fungoid mush, Mr. Birtwistle's tailor could not have been more dumflustered. All he did was to raise his eyebrows.

"I want a brownish color," said Birtwistle.

"Yes, well, we could do you a very nice suit in brown."

"Brown, with a twiddly sort of pattern."

"Sir?"

"A sort of twiddly-business all over it."

"A small check, sir?"

"No, no, no. All fiddle-de-dee."

"Fiddle-de—? I don't quite . . ."

"Well, show me some patterns. This new stuff they 're wearing. Funny sort of little dots and circles."

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"A little out of harmony, sir, if I might suggest."

"Why?"

"Well, it 's . . . ah . . . p'r'aps it 's on a par with Oxford bags and Russian boots, sir, if you get my meaning."

"You mean it 's common, vulgar . . . er . . . not the thing?"

"Well, I won't go so far, sir, as to . . ."

"But I saw a photograph of Lord Fillibeg in the 'Sphere' only yesterday, and he was wearing it."

"Oh, yes, sir, it 's quite all right, sir, only it 's a little . . . shall I say . . . youthful?"

"Well, dammit, I 'm not *old!*"

"Er . . . oh, no, sir. No, sir."

"Then what 's wrong with it?"

"Only I did n't remember you going in for anything quite so . . . shall I say modern? . . . sir. But, of course, it 's very nice stuff, sir, and very stylish when it 's made up. Very stylish."

"Well, I 'd like to see how it looks, anyhow."

"Very good, sir."

There were moments of difficulty and anxiety. When Dodd, Pertwee, and Cossett traveled to London with Birtwistle it was quite impossible to slip away to Lillipot Street; quite impossible to delay over the week-end. He had to go with his three friends to the Parisienne. During these occasions he was always a little scared lest Leeta might appear, or some slip of the tongue give the whole show away. He had to travel home with his three friends, and then he had to give some reason to Ettie for not taking things easy. Once he tried to give Dodd, Pertwee, and Cossett the slip.

"Dunno that I shall be on your train to-morrow, Dodd.

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I may have to . . . to see about . . . little bit of business . . . private matter 'uv me own, see?" He was very bad at this sort of thing.

"Aha! I bet you what you like, Pertwee, old boy, our friend Birtwistle 's wanting to give us the slip. Who 's your lady friend, Birtwistle?"

"Er . . . how joo mean? I . . . no, no, it 's about a . . . something I 've been meaning to see about for some time."

"Lumbago?"

That nettled him.

"What are you getting at, Dodd?"

"Oh, nothing"

"But we 're all going back together, are n't we?" asked Pertwee.

"Yes, come on, Birtwistle, you need n't go trying to sneak away on your own. Get out! It 's not really important. I bet you thought of it at the last moment. Just this minute, eh?"

That knocked Birtwistle stupid.

"Oh, all right. P'r'aps it does n't really matter," he said, and resigned himself to his fate.

This sort of thing made it difficult with Leeta. She did not like it if he neglected her in this way.

"I could n't get away," he told her.

"And li'le me left all aloney-own. . . ."

"Not a moment to spare."

"But you were in London, Teddy, 'cos I passed you with three friends of yours in the Haymarket."

"Er . . . No! did you?"

"I did, Teddy."

"M'm, well, business the whole time. Simply could n't get away. You know what it is."

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"Oh, I know, Teddy. I know you can't help it sometimes. I thought I 'd better not wave a glad glove at you, 'cos I recognized your Mr. Dodd."

"Eh?"

Now, Mr. Birtwistle had always taken scrupulous care never to mention Dodd, Pertwee, nor any other friend of his.

"Oh, I know his name 's Dodd 'cos once I saw him sign the book at the Parisienne."

"Oh?" That disturbed him.

"Did you ever see me sign the book there?"

"No, Teddy, why?"

"Er . . . I . . . I 've got such a funny signature, you know, eh? Have n't I? Edward Goodchild—such a scrawl, what?" but he felt that this was very wretched acting. No good at all.

If she knew that Dodd was Dodd, did she know that Teddy was—Mr. Birtwistle?

"Oh, I love the way you splather your name across the page. Such a tremenjus great T for Teddy!" But, when he considered the question, he could not remember ever having signed the name "Teddy" or "Goodchild" at all. However, he thought it best to let the matter drop.

It worried him a good deal on his homeward journey. He tried to read a magazine story called "If Cupid Could," but the thunderous rhythm of the train on the rails continually broke up his concentration with a monotonous mantra:

Such-a-tremenjus—T-for-Teddy!
Such-a-tremenjus—T-for-Teddy! . . .

He came to the conclusion (a conclusion which was foregone in his mind long before he came to it) that Leeta had no knowledge as to who he was; that she did not know his

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real name was Godwin Birtwistle; and that, although she had seen Dodd at the Parisienne and had recognized him again in the Haymarket, she did not know that he (Teddy) was a director of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co., Ltd. She could not know that. How could she? So why worry?

Such-a-tremenjus—T-for-Teddy!

thundered the London, Midland & Scottish, but Mr. Birtwistle took no notice. He was reading "If Cupid Could."

There were moments when Mr. Birtwistle wished he had never started on this enamoured adventure, but his wish had no will behind it. Life without Leeta would, he felt, be a sorry scheme for him now. Inarticulately he knew that he had overcome Orchard Leigh and infused into it a strange Elixir of Youth, only by virtue of the vital nerve of Nérédah Leeta Escourt Fairjohn.

He felt that he would drop back into his arm-chair again; that Ettie would overcome him and claim him once more as tired Father; that there would never be a second escape, if once he should snap the magic thread of . . . of this illicit love. Besides, he did not want to snap it. He liked it.

"Now that Godwin 's taking things more easily, he 's so much more himself," Ettie told people. "Up to London one day and back here the next was too much for him. He could n't have stood it for long."

As for Hermione, she and her mother became more and more Leetaish; they unfolded slowly into replicas of some one they had never seen nor heard of; and they did it little by little, like Japanese pith flowers unfolding in a glass of water.

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Hermione's wedding was to take place some time in May or June. Her birthday came along on the second of February.

"Joo know it 's my birthday next week, Daddy?"

"Is it, my dear? Now, what would you like for a birthday present?" Birtwistle was never able to resist the joy of present-giving.

"I don't want a present, Daddy, but I would just love to spend a day in London."

"Er . . . well, of course . . . I s'pose . . . H'm." It seemed to present a network of delicate problems to his mind.

"What about you, Ettie? Would you like to go up with Hermione and—"

"No, Godwin, I never did enjoy London very much, and it *is* such a long, weary journey both ways. Hermione wants to get a few things before May. You know, for the wedding."

Hermione accompanied her father on his next visit to London. He knew it was all up with any idea of seeing Leeta this time. No chance at all.

"Daddy, is there a band at the Euston Court?"

"Ah, no, my dear. No. I never heard one."

"Is n't it rather dull there? Stodgy?"

"Well, p'r'aps it is a little. Yes, p'r'aps it is a little."

"*Must* we stay at the Euston Court, daddy?"

"Well . . . I had n't thought of . . . anything else."

"It is a sort of birthday treat for me, is n't it?"

"'Course it is. Yes."

"Could n't we go to . . . to the Parisienne, Daddy, or somewhere where it 's tiz?"

(That "tiz" made him shiver. It was a Leetaish expression.)

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"We could—yes."

"Do let 's!"

"M'm, well . . . I 'll think it over. I 'll think about it."

"I would love it, Daddy."

"Well, I 'll see."

They stayed at the Parisienne.

To begin with, Birtwistle was on tenterhooks the whole time. Orchard Leigh and Lillipot Street had never been brought quite so near each other, and he dreaded lest any little faux pas should bring the whole castle of cards—his *château en Espagne,* his enchanted *pied à terre*—falling about his ears. Hermione said: "They all seem to know you here, daddy; d' you often come?"

"Er . . . not so very often. No. Now and then—with Dodd."

He wanted to get away from the Parisienne.

"I say, Hermione, now you 're up here; you 've never dined in Soho, have you, eh? Bohemians, artists, poets—all that—"

"How lovely, Daddy!"

"So would you like to? I know quite a good little place—the 'Isola Bella.' You 'd enjoy that."

Hermione did n't care what happened, so long as it kept happening. This was London! Piccadilly! Soho! Life!

They drove to the "Isola Bella." They sat in a little alcove by the window; Birtwistle insisted upon sitting there.

"Throw your coat over the back of the chair, Hermione," he instructed. Mr. Birtwistle took entire control. He ordered exactly the dishes which Leeta had ordered. Hermione loved it all.

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"Daddy, is that an artist, d' you think—over there—with that woman in the pink thing?"

"I expect so, my dear."

He even finished with an Old Brandy. A sunny glow suffused Mr. Birtwistle, and out of that sunny glow came a desire to . . . to . . . well to give her a li'le present.

Birthdays come but once a year, eh?

"To-morrow we 're going off to choose you a li'le birthday present, Hermione," he announced.

"*Daddy!* How tiz of you!" Again the "tiz" set his nerves on the qui vive.

"Wonder if you 'll like it?"

"What 's it to be, Daddy?" The words "Daddy" and "Teddy" seemed to get confused in his ears. No, this is Hermione, saying "Daddy," of course. Yes.

"It 's to be one of those chubby umbrellas, Hermione, with a duck's head on it—"

"*Daddy!* How tiz!"

"And I thought I 'd get one for Mummy, too, with a bulldog's head, or an owl, or something, eh?" Perhaps Old Brandy made the word "Mummy" easier to mumble than "Mother."

"Daddy, *do* let 's go to a show."

"Well, all right. Which one?"

"Let 's go to 'Could n't I Love You Some' at the Hippodrome."

It was all very jolly and Mr. Birtwistle enjoyed it enormously; so much so that once during the evening he felt a twinge of conscience. Leeta expecting him. Hard luck on Leeta. Out with another gi . . . er . . . out with his own daughter. Well, that 's all right? Yes. Quite all right. Of course. Yes.

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"'Joy yourself, 'Mione?" he asked afterward, on the way back to the hotel.

"Rath-*er!*" she said. Queer how that ingenuous "Rath-*er!*" pulled him up. Leeta would have said something outrageously original, eh? She'd have said, "Oh, Fra Bentos, Teddy!" or something captivatingly nonsensical like that.

The next morning there was a real birthday surprise for Hermione. It took her breath away. Mr. Birtwistle had found his new suit waiting for him at the Parisienne. He came down to breakfast clad in the very latest spring suitings for men, in marzipan and brown madder.

"*Daddy!*" whispered Hermione. "You are tiz! Where did you get it?"

"Er . . . rather nice. Don't you think?"

There was a meeting at Norvic House at 11 A. M. Hermione went off toward Regent Street, shopping. Mr. Birtwistle slunk back to his room and changed into his "usual dark-gray cloth, sir, I presume."

After all, one has to . . . to be a little careful not to . . . go too far. One must n't . . . ah . . . overstep the . . . ah . . . bounds of propriety, must one?

Very nice suit, all the same. Very nice.

He had hoped to snatch half an hour or so to run round and see Leeta, but there was a Mr. Gowan who wanted a word with him after the meeting, and Birtwistle was due to meet Hermione for lunch at the Parisienne at 1:15, and they intended to get the 3:35 home. He felt a little bit put out.

All through lunch he was troubled by an undercurrent of anxiety: Leeta might stroll in. He set his mind upon other things, deliberately.

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"D' you know, Hermione, I rather want to buy myself a little present," he said. The idea had come into his mind quite on its own account.

"I wonder if we 'll have time?" he said. He wanted to get away from the Parisienne.

"What is it, Daddy?"

"You know those miniature Japanese gardens in bowls —little bridges and dwarf trees and ducks and things?"

"M'm."

"Don't you think it would look rather jolly on the dining-room table?"

"Oh, simply tiz, Daddy!"

"Well, let 's go and get one now, shall we, at Liberty's? Finish your ice."

You pack the miniature properties into the bowl with moss. Ettie loved it. She filled it up with real water for the ducks to swim on, instead of having looking-glass.

"You are a child—buying yourself toys, Godwin!" she laughed.

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XVII

MR. BIRTWISTLE COMES UPON A RIFT IN THE LUTE

CRABBED Age and Youth cannot live together? Pure nonsense. If only Mr. Birtwistle had been older by another fifteen years or so, he might have had a chance, but Middle Age and Youth must needs be yoked askant.

If the truth must be told, deep down in his very, very, very respectable soul Mr. Birtwistle was mildewed with a speck of shame. He was fascinated by Leeta, and, also, he was just a tinge ashamed to be seen about with her in broad daylight. There were times when Leeta rather resented this. Naturally.

The more Mr. Birtwistle rediscovered Orchard Leigh (and he was always coming upon fresh joys, what with the rubbish fire, to begin with, and now the idea of actually making a real Japanese garden, like the one in the blue bowl, below the tennis-court) the less interest did he take in his little flat in London. By almost imperceptible degrees his enthusiasm for frequent week-ends in London began to evaporate. Leeta was quick enough to notice this gradual change. Naturally. And she resented it for several reasons. First of all, it foretokened an end to Fifteen A, sooner or later; and where was she to go then? It was also a silent and unconscious, but all the more poignant, insinuation that her feminine charms were losing

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their potency upon the male. She had no idea that Teddy had rediscovered Ettie and Hermione and Gruff and Ethel and Jane and . . . everything in and about his own home. She knew nothing about his home. All she knew was, he did not seem half so keen as he used to be.

She hated herself ever and again, because, deep down in her very, very, very childlike soul she had come to depend upon Teddy for more than mere £ s. d. She "rather liked" her Teddy-boy, with just that artless affection she had lavished as a little child upon a huge teddy-bear. It was good to have some one older than herself. She could ask Teddy's advice on all kinds of things. On how to fill in forms; where to go about lost property at Scotland Yard; what to write to the Insurance Company when making a claim; whether she could pay a one-and-sixpenny postal order into a bank—little practical problems of everyday life.

Efty-boy was no use for that sort of thing. Efty-boy could not pay her bills. Teddy had become very necessary to Nérédah Leeta, and, in a way, she was fond of him.

There had been an intimation of oncoming squalls quite early on. She had again run up bills. This time to the extent of £223 17s. 2d. It certainly took the wind out of Birtwistle's sails.

"You 're not angry, Teddy?"

"M'well . . . er . . . it is a little bit stiff, Leeta."

"Oh, Teddy, *don't* be angry with me, 'cos I do try so hard to do without things; and nearly all this is for you."

"I know, b-but I did n't want the things. I mean *I* did n't buy them."

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"But, Teddy-boy, I did have to get you a comfy rug for your bedroom, and that only cost £4 15s. d. There was nothing—bare lino!"

"M'm, then there 's this 'English quilted satin dressing-gown, lined Jap silk, £5 19s. 6d.' "

"Well, Teddy, I can't freeze when I slip out to make an early cup of tea for you, can I?"

"And what 's this—'black satin bar shoes, diamanté heel, 75/9.'?"

"Well, Teddy, you can't expect me to go barefoot."

"But seventy-five and nine, Leeta!"

"But, Teddy, I 'd simply nothing I could put on—"

"H'm, well . . . I do think you 've gone over the mark, Leeta. I do really. £223 17s. 2d. between March the fourteenth and April the fifth.

"Teddy, I won't do it again. Don't scold me."

"Well . . ."

"Don't scold li'le Leeta-bird, Teddums."

"M-m . . ."

"I will be much more careful, Teddy. I did n't know you 'd mind."

"M'well, of course, I 'm not . . . not stingy, Leeta. I don't want you to think I 'm stingy. I don't grudge you the things, but . . ."

"I know, Teddy. I know I ought to 've been more careful. I let it rip. But Teddy, I 've never had more than tuppence to play with, and it *was* such fun! You 're not angry?"

"No, no. Not angry . . ."

"Not one li'le teeny-weeny bit?"

"N-no."

"Kissums li'le Leeta-bird, Teddy."

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All the same, it was a very nasty jolt.

After that Leeta had been much more careful. She slowed down the spending, and she took care to present the bills as they came along, one or two at a time. Mr. Birtwistle was not such a fool as not to realize that Leeta was a very expensive item upon his bank-account. True, he could very well afford it (a maxim upon which Leeta had all along justified her acquisitive impulse), but people with money do not look at things in that light.

For the first five months everything went smoothly, except for that little hitch about running up bills.

Once, when Mr. Birtwistle came in after a very heavy day of board meetings and rushing about, he found the flat deserted. It annoyed him. He sat waiting for her moodily.

"Oh, hallo?" she said. "I 've been shopping."

"Did n't you know I was coming up to-day?"

" 'Course I did, Teddy."

"M'm. Nobody here. Been waiting half an hour or more."

"Oh, poor old Teddy-boy! Still, I sometimes have to wait for weeks, don't I?—and even then you don't always turn up."

That, however, was only a simmering of what was to come. In between that somewhat tart retort (which was soon forgotten) and the outbreak of hostilities there were jolly little supper parties; theaters; week-ends on the river; Brighton; moonlight motor runs in the Baby Austin (yes, Leeta had been successful in coaxing a "dinkums li'le speedy-box" out of him), and chocolates, and kisses, and cocktails, and cash. Nearly six months of earthly paradise for Leeta, and Teddy made a fairly good middle-aged Adam.

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"Ettie," said Mr. Birtwistle, one evening, "what about a motor run, eh? Beautiful moonlight night."

"At this time of the night, Godwin? Why it's long past eleven!"

"N' mind, why not? Hermione gone to a dance—won't be back till morning—so why would n't we go off on the spree?"

They did. It was glorious. She tied up her semi-shingled head in a bright batik scarf. He kissed her at fifty miles an hour and she laughed. They went speeding out along the Rollerston road, slid past Slithby's sleeping cottages and its ghostly gray church, swept over the wide, open uplands of Newton Clegg Moors, ghastly black and white with gorse and rain-puddles, and came back downhill all the way via Sheepbell Scar, Middenthwaite, and Lob's Nose.

He enjoyed this even more than the last run with Leeta to Maidenhead, because Leeta always insisted upon driving the Baby Austin herself. Perhaps the quiet strength of the great humming Daimler was more soothing; and he liked to feel himself in control, with Le . . . no . . . with Ettie at his side. Great fun.

"Joo 'ave the car out last night, sir?"

"Er . . . yeah—bit of a run."

"I *thought* some on 'd 'ad it out, some'ow."

"Bit of a run by moonlight."

"Oh?"

"Yeah . . . with—with Mrs. Birtwistle."

"Late, was n't it, sir?"

"Oh, 'bout 'leven or so."

"Fancy!"

"Just for a spin, Badley. Good sport. Moonlight night."

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"On'y, the rear light was left on, sir."

"No, was it?"

"It was, sir."

"H'm . . . must 'a' forgotten about it," concluded Mr. Birtwistle, lamely.

"Must 'a' done, sir," said Badley, tritely.

It was Badley who discovered that Mr. Birtwistle, turning in at the Orchard Leigh drive after that joy-ride at 1.15 in the morning, had scraped one of the splashboards horribly. The scratch on the car was plain enough, but, with the instincts of a detective, he found the abrasion on the apple-green paint of the drive gate and took Mr. Birtwistle to see it.

"You sure that was n't done before, Badley?"

"Certain, sir," said Badley.

"Funny I never felt anything of it."

"Tricky things to drive, these big long cars, sir."

Badley hated any one to drive the Daimler. He looked upon it as his own. If anything went wrong it was Badley who had to get it right.

After this Birtwistle set his heart on getting a Baby Austin for Ettie. Ettie ought to have one.

"But, Godwin, I should never dare to drive it."

"Easy as anything, my dear."

"But I don't really want a Baby Austin. We 've got the Daimler. We don't want two cars."

"Run down any minute to the town in it, shopping. Hermione can run me down to the club. It 'll be a runabout, see? You need a little car, Ettie, so that you can run out and about without having to call Badley."

"A Baby Austin, Daddy? How bonce!" thrilled Hermione, when she heard about it.

Badley was very glad.

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Not only had Ettie and Hermione taken on a modishness *à la* Leeta, quite unknowingly, but as the weeks went by Orchard Leigh became more and more a country-house replica of the little flat. While Leeta was being held up with Efty-boy in her Baby Austin in Piccadilly Circus, Ettie was driving Mrs. Ponce down to the Hardwicks' for bridge in *her* Baby Austin. When Leeta flourished her Chubby duck's head umbrella to stop a taxi, Hermione was wondering whether to take her Stumpy duck's head umbrella with her to tea at Dot's.

When Camilla came up to Orchard Leigh to see them all, there was the crinoline doll tea-cozy that "went" so well with the rose-colored tea service. And on the dining-room table stood a blue bowl with its midgety Japanese miniature garden, dwarf *chabo* tree and all.

Mr. Birtwistle even went so far as to insist that cowslip yellow and smudge gray was the most restful and dignified colour scheme for house decoration. He intimated that next year he intended to have Orchard Leigh "done out throughout" in cowslip yellow and smudge gray. He liked it.

"But, Daddy, where 've you ever seen it?"

"Seen it? Er . . . seen it? No need to see it. Can't I imagine it? Pale yellow and gray. A very beautiful soft gray—"

"Smudge gray, you said, Daddy."

"Er . . . yes, smudge gray. It 's called smudge gray."

"You seem to know all about it, anyhow."

"Besides," said Birtwistle, determined to get himself clear of the entanglement, and at the same time not to budge an inch, "I may have seen it. I may have seen something of the sort in 'Ideal Homes' or . . . one of those papers. I don't remember now exactly."

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A month or two before this Ettie had said to Hermione:

"I can't think why Father wants one of these pouffes in the drawing-room, can you? He says he's ordered one from Perks, my dear."

"I know. He asked me the other day if I liked pouffes, and he seemed so frightfully keen to get one I did n't like to tell him I hate the sight of them."

Sure enough, there was the pouffe in the Orchard Leigh drawing-room.

"Father *is* going it, Mother," said Dot.

There was one thing Mr. Birtwistle would have liked for his own study, to stand on top of the bureau; and that was a little Indo-Chinese cabinet of red sandalwood carved in, well . . . birds and flowers and things. But he never came across anything of the sort, although once or twice he peered into antique shops in London without knowing what he was looking for.

One day, greatly daring, Mr. Birtwistle determined to put on his brown suit.

"It's simply tiz, Mother! *Do* put it on, Daddy!"

Ettie thought it was "really quite nice, Godwin," but in her heart of hearts she felt it was a little bit . . . queer. She was not sure about it.

And then, as if to put an end to it outright, Ponce pounced upon him at the Woodlea Golf-Club and shook his confidence to such an extent that Mr. Birtwistle never had the pluck to venture forth in it again.

"Aha-a-a—*weepha!* Loogad Ole Birtwistle! *whooze-wheezh.* Wher-jer get-cher diddy-me-diddy-me Do-da suit, Birtwistle! Eh? *A-heeph!*"

Mr. Birtwistle found he was quite "off his game." The first three holes were halved in four, three, four. Birtwistle was bunkered and lost the fourth. He was very

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crooked at the sixth, and lost that as well. Indeed, from this point Pertwee went very steadily away.

Mr. Birtwistle returned home crestfallen. Ponce, he felt, was not merely an ignorant blusterer, but a rank outsider. You know—nouveau riche.

There was a formless desire at the back of Birtwistle's mind to "have done" with this double life, but he had no idea how to get out of it. By degrees this urge began to shape itself into good advice and moral exhortations.

Very expensive, running . . . er . . . this little flat. Don't know that it 's really worth it, said his business acumen.

To which his conscience, waking for a moment from its torpor, responded: And definitely wrong. A life of deception, double dealing, and moral crookedness. End it. End it now, Godwin.

Backing up his comatose conscience came the voice of herd instinct put to fright: Bound to leak out sooner or later. These things always do. Far better to cut your losses and get free. A pretty to-do it 'll be when Ettie and Hermione and the whole family get to know what sort of life you 're leading! What about the business, eh? Ruin your good name.

Close upon the heels of this panic he heard prudence, saying: All very well, but take care. Think before you do anything rash. After all, if you just cut and run now she 'd have a very good case against you. And don't forget she knows Dodd 's a friend of yours. She might even manage to have a word with him somehow.

As if to give support to this counsel, yet another still small voice spoke up, the semiquaver of smug Samaritanism: Apart from that, how can one leave this poor girl in

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the lurch? To take her up, help her, and then fling her aside because . . . because of what people will say! Bah! . . . No. One must stand by her. One must have courage. One cannot leave a fellow-creature in need. Where could she go? What would she do? Down, down, down into the depths.

And then, sliding so easily from this to a comforting sentimentalism: Such a damn-pretty girl, too. Refined, young, and . . . I'm very fond of Leeta. Very fond of her. We've come to mean a good deal to each other. Do'no' what life would be like without Leeta. Oh, I know . . . I know I've been foolish, wicked, sinful . . . I know . . . I know . . . but, but, but—

Ending at last on that incorrigible note of uppish puckishness which was always ready to call the tune: Oh, well, never mind. Cheer up! No one knows. We're all human—*So!* Never mind the rain . . . do it again! . . . Bower Bird, Billie! All come right in the end, eh? Yeah, sure to.

He had arrived at this enheartening but inconclusive state of mind when, after an absence of three weeks, he took a taxi from Euston Station to Lillipot Street. By the time he had paid the taxi-driver he was thoroughly pleased with himself and with life. Next day there was to be an important meeting and a dinner in honor of the return of Sir Eli Smith from his South-American tour. Mr. Birtwistle would be expected to say a few words of appreciation. . . . But for to-night, let's forget about business.

Just as he reached the wide landing, the door of Fifteen A opened and a young man rushed out.

"Cheer-o, Leeta!" he called and dashed past Mr. Birtwistle and down the stone steps. Mr. Birtwistle looked

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over the railings and saw the young man going down two and three steps at a time. Sallow face, tiny clippity mustache, and a cigarette. Egyptian cigarette. B'h! whiff of Egyptian tobacco. Mr. Birtwistle hated the smell of Egyptian cigarettes, and for some unknown reason, he hated the young man. He had an inkling that he had seen that young man before.

"Hal-lo, Teddy-boy! Is n't it ni-i-i-ce to see ums again, after all this empty void!"

She was very charming. New dress, too. More bills.

"Teddy?" she said, seating him on the settee.

"Um?"

"Do let 's go to the Savoy to-night. I 've never been there."

This was very awkward. Sir Eli Smith, his wife and daughter, and Mr. Garro-Jex, Sir Eli's private secretary, were all staying at the Savoy. The Savoy of all places was the one Mr. Birtwistle wished to avoid. He knew it was more than probable than Mr. Allan Gowan, of Gowan Consolidated Nitrates Ltd., and perhaps Sir Thomas Briscoe, M.P., of the Briscoe Patent Ferro-Concrete (1920) Co., Ltd. (whose daughter Frank had married) would be dining at the Savoy that evening. Quite impossible to be seen at the Savoy with Leeta. Out of the question.

"Do let 's, Teddy! And then, if it 's a twinklums night, let 's makums li'le Baby Aussie speedums all the way to Richmond. Would n't that be glitto?"

"Er . . . glitto?"

"Well, *you* know—instant postum. Just a flick of dinner at the Sav' and then 'say it with joy-prong' all the way to Richmond. Oh, I 'd get that Auntie-isn't-with-us feeling at once! So do say 'yes,' Teddy-boy!"

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"Er . . . you do'wanner go to the Savoy, do you, Leeta?"

"But I 'm just besee-e-eching, Teddy!"

"Well, look here . . . not to-night, Leeta. I 'd . . . I 'd rather not. Not to the Savoy."

"But why not, Teddy?"

"Well . . . I 'd rather not."

"But how unkind! Teddy, I *want* to. You said you 'd take me, weeks ago."

"Yes, but not to-night."

"You might say why, Teddy!"

"Oh . . . I don't know why, exactly."

"How very ungallant! I did n't expect a blank refusal."

"I 'm tired rather," said Birtwistle, resorting to the easy method.

"Oh, bosh, Teddy! You 're not tired when *you* want to go out anywhere. Just lately you 've—well you have n't bothered much about me, have you?"

"Er . . . *I* have n't? Why, wat-choo mean, Leeta?"

"Last time you were up I asked you to take me to the Five and Nine Club and you would n't. You were tired that time, too. You never used to be tired."

"Let 's have a little dinner at . . . at the 'Isola Bella,' or somewhere, and then—"

"Oh, damn the 'Isola Bella'! I want to go to the Savoy, Teddy. Why won't you take me?"

"I will—another time. Why must it be this evening?"

"I 'm fed up being treated like . . . like . . . well, as if I were just your beastly mist—"

"Rubbish, Leeta. Who 's ever treated you like that?"

"Oh, I know what it is. I s'pose some friends of yours

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will be at the Savoy to-night, and you 'd be ashamed to be seen with me?"

"That 's not true," Mr. Birtwistle began vehemently, but realizing that it was the absolute truth, stopped, and ended: "You don't expect me to—to advertise that fact that I 'm . . . well . . . you know I 'm a . . . a married man."

"Yes, and I 've got my feelings like other people. Why don't you say what 's the matter, Teddy? D' you think I can't see, all these weeks past?"

"See what? . . . My dear girl, I 've paid I don't know what for extrav—"

"Yes, and now you 're getting tired of me. Is n't it as plain as broad daylight?"

"Nothing of the sort, Leeta. Really, I don't know what you 're talking about. I 've done my best to—"

"Oh, shut up, Teddy! You don't think I 'm such a booby I can't see through it all?"

"See through what all?"

"And I 'm fed up, too. It 's damn dull."

"See through *what* all?"

"Everything. Every mortal thing."

"Well, what are we rowing about?"

"I 'm saying it 's dull. Deadly dull."

"What is?"

"Being here in this flat on my own, waiting for you."

"But you know I . . . I can't stop here. You know I—"

"Oh, know, I know. But now you don't even bother. You don't really want me. And soon you 'll say 'I 'd better get out of this.' You 're all the same."

"Who 's all the same?"

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"It does n't matter. I 'm not going to be left stranded—"

"*Who 's* all the same?"

"I know you want to get rid of me."

"I do not."

"You do, Teddy. You do. You know it." She faced him, and he quailed before her. There was a dreadful, empty silence. Both Leeta and Teddy felt that the situation was gathering momentum, not responding to the wheel, getting out of hand, liable to shy at any scrap of newspaper in the road, and then stampede.

Mr. Birtwistle's sensations were most uncomfortable. He got up from the settee, thrust his hands into his pockets, jingled keys and loose coin, strolled toward the window, came back, whistled softly, and sat down again.

Leeta, in a cowslip-yellow Celes Crêpe-de-Chine wash frock, novelty checked and striped design (price, 78/6), was a cage-bird, a poor little song-bird, a cowslip-colored canary caught in a cage—and he, Birtwistle, was the ruffian bird-fancier. Bird-fancier . . .

"I s'pose we all make mistakes," he said, and glanced from his watch-chain, resting on a waistcoat bulge, to Leeta's artificial indifference. She simply snorted, threw half a cigarette into the fireplace, and turned away toward the window.

The cozy intimacy of the little flat—"his" little flat—thrust itself upon him with a pang of bitter-sweet regret. He felt as a middle-aged man would feel could he visit again the nursery of his infancy and find his toy trains still there, with their little semicircular rails shining on the floor, the toy signal toppled over by the chair leg, the cloth elephant stained with ink, and his box of bricks scattered in exact disorder, some on the carpet and some on the

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linoleum, "'cos I'm going to build a railway station after tea, Nanny."

He felt the little flat closing in about him, the smudge-gray walls and yellow paint-work shrinking inward upon him, the black-and-gold cushions dwindling to mere pin-cushions, the ceiling slowly lowering, the miniature Jap garden diminishing to the size of a thimble, the handsome brocade flowering of the pouffe wilting into a mundungus of decayed kisses . . . decayed kisses . . . and the slim cowslip-yellow novelty check-and-stripe wash frock, with its semi-shingled black head on its white neck, and its maximum silk hole-proof legs in light nude (5/11 per pair), ready to flutter out of the window and disappear forever beyond the smudge-gray concatenation of chimney-pots. The li'le Leeta-bird would flutter away, he felt; and he wanted to go across to her and say, "Don't fly away, Leeta—don't leave me," but he could not move. He was a great sodden lump of human impotency. The bizarre brightness of the little room nauseated his senses; it was like a bright toadstool that would fall into putrescence at a touch—like a distant barrel-organ thumping "Would n't you like to Yucatan with me?" during the burial service.

"Well?" she said, turning her back to the window.

"Well, Leeta . . ." he said weakly.

Nérédah Leeta Escourt Fairjohn was not sure of herself. This situation had not been carefully planned, she felt. She had not meant it to bridle and then lose itself in tongue-tied silences. She was hesitating because of that psychic umbilical cord which had attached her affections to Teddy-boy in spite of all her sophisticated Mayfairishness. She was not sure that this was the right moment. She half wished it were possible to annihilate

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these last few seconds, wipe out this halting bickering, and begin again. But the situation itself had taken control. It would not allow either of them to obliterate so much as an eyelash tremor. Everything went forward with deadly precision to its inevitable climax. In his desire to disengage himself from the unpleasant dilemma of the moment Mr. Birtwistle attempted to side-track the conversation. He began with a forced cheeriness in his voice:

"Er . . . who *was* that young man who . . . who was here just now, Leeta? Thought I recognized him."

"Efty-boy," she told him in a hard, blank voice; and then, unable to stand the tension: "Good God! Can't I have my own friends to see me? Have I got to be a . . . a sort of recluse—shut up and walled in? You *won't* take me out anywhere; *you* don't care if I 'm left alone here for weeks at a time! It was bound to come to this, sooner or later. I might have known."

"Known what?" said Mr. Birtwistle, mechanically, and without requiring any answer.

"You 're ashamed to be seen about with me, as if I were a common . . . yes . . . a common woman of the streets—"

"Leeta!"

"It 's true! You dare n't be seen with me in case you might run across one of your friends—and have to explain—"

"Explain?"

"Yes, explain that you lead a double life, that you keep two homes going, that you keep a mistress, that you 're not the blameless, respectable, married business man they think you are! That you 're a sham—like the rest of us!"

She knew this was bad technique; that it was wild,

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foolish talk which might even endanger her object; but she had to say it in order to keep up her own self-esteem.

"Well, of course, Leeta, if you feel like that—"

"Oh, you need n't think you 're going to say, 'Thank you for calling, good day,' and slip out of it as easily as all that. I 'm not such a born fool."

"Er . . . really I don't understand . . ."

She changed tactics intuitively.

"I suppose you think I don't know who you are?"

Teddy felt himself going anæmic.

"Eh?"

Mouth dry. Swallowing hard. No saliva.

"You don't imagine I was sucked in by your 'Teddy Goodchild' make-believe, do you?"

"Er . . . b-b-but look here, Leeta . . . I . . . I . . ."

"Oh, it was n't too bad for a beginner, of course."

"You . . . you 've known all along then?"

"Well, of cou-r-r-se, I 've known Mr. Godwin Birtwistle, of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co., since the day after I met him, 'cos I just went and asked the manager at the Parisienne, and he told me."

It uprooted Mr. Birtwistle's mind from its none too steady emplacement, and flung it in disordered fragments to the dead-end of pandemonium; a mental explosion took place which left it in a state of vertiginous tumult.

She knows—she knows I 'm Birtwistle! She knows I 'm Birtwistle! She knows I 'm Birtwistle of Birtwistle, Blenkin, Dodd & Co.! Ettie . . . Ettie . . . Ettie . . . Gruff. Oh, God . . . Orchard Leigh.

"Well, Teddy, what about it, eh?" the quiet, cold confidence of Leeta's voice pierced his soul like a stiletto.

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"I . . . I don't understand. I don't understand," he said blankly.

"But how entrancingly obtuse, Teddy!"

He looked up at her and found her remote—ninety million miles away from him. She was overpoweringly attractive in this aura of aloofness.

He pulled himself together.

'Why did n't you tell me you . . . you knew I was Birtwistle . . . before?" His voice shook a little.

"Oh, but you *told* me your name was Edward Goodchild, Teddy, the very first time we met; don't you remember?"

"Yes, I remember. Quite well."

They dropped into a pot-hole of silence again. She stood by the little black table with its blue bow reflecting darkly on the polished surface. Her pointed, pink-polished finger-tips fiddled with the colored celluloid ducks. He could see her elegantly manicured nails reflected in the looking-glass pond of the miniature Jap garden. The stunted dwarf *chabo* tree was half hidden by the symmetric beauty of her arm. The flesh rippled smoothly as she moved the ducks under the miniature bridge.

He watched her for a moment, could not stand the second or two of taut silence, and felt for his pipe. The feel of it in his hand brought to mind a flood of Orchard Leigh memories. He let it slip back into his pocket. Never in all his life had Mr. Birtwistle experienced such acute mental agony as he was now going through.

"What do you intend to do?" he asked.

"Do? Absolutely nothing, Teddy."

"Don't call me Teddy, for God's sake!"

"Mr. Birtwistle, I mean."

That stabbed him cruelly, especially the mocking little

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smile that flickered round the rosebud lips and vanished again.

It was so dusk-laden in the room now that Leeta and Godwin merged into the half-light. Neither of them wished to switch on the electric glare. They allowed the London twilight to etch them into darkling visibility.

"You see . . . er . . . Leeta . . . it 's a bit awkward for me—"

"Very."

"If this became known, I mean."

"Exactly."

"Well . . ."

"Well, what?"

"Well, we can't go on like this, can we?"

"Oh, why not?"

"Well, can we?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On you, I suppose."

"M'm . . . You seem to 've changed, Leeta, these last few weeks. Frankly, it 's beyond me altogether," he felt he was regaining some of his self-assurance at last.

"Well, in that case, had n't we better bring our little —ha!—intimacy to a close?"

Mr. Birtwistle jumped at the bait. His heart had been urging him to get away, get away, get away—to break free from all this underhand business, and to go back to Ettie and to Orchard Leigh a wiser and a better man.

"Yes," he said, "I think we had—"

"Oh, *do* you! So you imagine you can get all you want out of me, and then, because you 've got tired of me—or else it 's because you 're frightened you 'll get found out, or both—you think you can slip away and no questions

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asked? Nothing doing, Mr. Birtwistle! Just because I've been a good sport and . . . and . . . well, a good pal to you . . . you think you can treat me like some—"

"Now come, Leeta, that's the second or third time you've suggested—"

"Yes, and I mean it. I mean it."

An extra gust of fear suddenly overtook Birtwistle and found its outlet in anger. White with infuriation he shouted:

"I'm *damned* if I'll put up with that sort of suggestion after all I've—"

"Would you mind getting out of my flat, Mr. Birtwistle? You make me wilt with utter boredom."

"Your flat! Of all the— Yes, I'll get out, now—post-haste!—and I hope it'll be the last time I ever set foot in it!"

"Same here, Teddy!"

"So, anyhow, Leeta, after what you've said to-night—this is the end, see? This is the end. I'll go! I'll go now. Rank ingratitude."

"Not quite the end!"

"How dare you call me Teddy after the damnable lies and filthy insinuations and . . . and . . . and disgusting suggestions that you've—"

"Not quite the end?"

"Yes—finish! I've done with you!"

She laughed. The laughter stung him to further fury:

"Even a common prostitute would n't lower herself to . . . to this level. . . . Hundreds of pounds squandered on you—anything you wanted I got. But for me you'd be—God knows where you'd be!"

"Yes, Teddy, and I know it."

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"Yes. And then, just because I can't always be ready at hand to take you about and buy you presents you . . . you turn and rend me! Well, I sha'n't forget this lesson."

"No, Teddy, I bet you won't."

"And when my back 's turned I dare say this Efty-boy or some one else—"

"Well, it makes a bit of a change, Teddy."

"You actually acknowledge it—glory in it! I got you a flat—paid for every damn thing in it—and you turn it into a . . . a . . . a brothel!"

He shouted and fumed. Even as the angry words came out of his mouth, he knew that he was mortally afraid; that this stream of abuse was no more than a smoke-screen against his own weakness.

"But how 'long complete novelish'!" she cried.

"Well, I 'm going!"

"Oh, no, do stay, Teddy. I do love ums li'le tantrums!"

She heard him stride to the door, open it, and shut it with a brain-shattering slam.

Fumbling with the switch in the hall. *Click.* A line of light under the door. She could hear him breathing heavily in an effort to get into his overcoat. A moment later the outer door shut and locked itself. The distant echo of feet on the stone steps outside.

Mr. Birtwistle had gone.

He was ashen gray and trembling with the nervous exhaustion due to the emotional upheaval of the last hour and a half. As he reached the street he said:

"Thank God, it 's all over!"

But he was in no state of mind to consider what the consequences of this unexpected turn of events were likely to be.

He hailed a taxi and crawled inside.

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"Where for, sir?"

"Er . . . er . . . Hotel Parisienne," and as he sat back he said again, "Thank God, it 's come to an end at last!"

As for Leeta, she remained in the gloomy room. She was like a bodiless being in a cube of neutral tint. The window, an oblong of rich royal blue with a dado of purple black chimney-pots and a solitary splur of green incandescent gas-light, was the only visible shape. She did not wish to switch on the light; did not wish to see the all-too-familiar objects of the little flat. The blue-black-purple haze, quilted and puckered into reddish night, enfolded her troubled spirit.

She felt suddenly lonely—oh, dreadfully alone! Teddy had gone. Gone for good. She had not meant it to come to that . . . not yet, anyhow. It had gone wrong. Why had she let things get out of hand? Why had n't she . . . been more careful?

The strain had broken her nerve. She realized, now, that she ought not to have let herself go; ought not to have allowed things to come to this . . . sudden end.

She liked Teddy; she needed Teddy; she needed Teddy's protection; she needed his help. He was n't such a bad sort, really. Oh, he was old and staid, and frightfully dull, sometimes; and he was getting tired of her. She knew that, but she had not wanted things to take this turn.

What was she to do now? Go back to work—some wretched office, or something? Go back and housekeep for her father? No.

Why had she been such a fool—such an utter fool?

For a few moments she sobbed in that night-filled room overlooking the roofs and the chimney-pots.

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She wanted Teddy. Yes, she wanted Teddy. And yet she wanted to be free from Teddy. She wanted Youth and Life . . . old man's plaything.

Then she pulled herself together.

Well, it's no good. Life's hard, and one must not allow sentiment to stand in the way. I can't go on with no money. Mr. Birtwistle has the cash—and I have the whip hand.

It's beastly, but I'm driven to it. What else can I do? Besides, I'm past all moralizing—I'm through with all that. I've seen too much. For the sake of Jack's memory I'm not going to go under. One may not be exactly virtuous, but one declines to be . . . left absolutely stranded. One has a spark of pride left, anyhow.

She switched the light on.

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XVIII

MR. BIRTWISTLE SEEKS LEGAL ADVICE

MR. BIRTWISTLE found himself stranded. He had slammed the door of Fifteen A with passionate resentment mingled with unutterable relief; and here he was with no pajamas, no tooth-brush, no clothes, no suit-case—nothing.

The very sight of those revolving doors made him want to crawl away from the harsh glitter of the Parisienne into the kindly obscurity and squalid quiet of—well, anywhere that's quiet and . . . and where he would be unknown. He could not face the Parisienne; it was too crowded with memories. He paid the taxi-man, hesitated, and then strolled toward Piccadilly Circus. He wanted food.

In the end he found himself sitting in an A.B.C. in the Strand, sipping a cup of scalding-hot tea and eating two eggs on toast.

Mr. Birtwistle had done something which he had wanted to do these many weeks. He had broken free from his double life—broken with the past—broken forever from that network of duplicity and moral dereliction which had first troubled his conscience, and then put it out of action by cumulative doses of . . . Piver's *Trèfle Incarnate?*

He was glad. He was high-spirited, almost. He wanted to go back now, on the next train, to Orchard

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Leigh, rush into the hall, and shout: "Ettie Ettie! I've come back! It's all over and done with! I did wrong; but I've come back to you!"

He knew that was impossible, but his heart sang with the joy of freedom. He was like a shipwrecked seafarer who, wrenching himself free at last from the languorous embrace and the enchanting music of some sweet siren, floats back to his own people upon a makeshift raft.

Just as this involuntary transport of release was about to turn into sanctimonious repentance; just as Robin Goodfellow was about to put things right with Mrs. Grundy; just, so to speak, as his own private "Callisthenes" was about to write a chatty column advertising all the good points of Messrs. Godwin, Self & Co., Ltd.—the bubble of delight—*blink!*—went out, and left him staring stupidly at a notice stuck on the mirrored wall opposite:

Ask for
BOVRIL

Will it leak out? *Ask for Bovril.* Will she tell any one? *Ask for Bovril.* She's . . . she's capable of . . . of making things very awkward. *Ask for Bovril.* . . .

He went out of the A.B.C. and walked about the streets. Anxiety settled upon him. He became more and more apprehensive. Misgivings, forebodings, perplexities, begat themselves in his mind like diabolic micrococci injected by some psychoanalytic Satan.

Ettie may know. She may have got to know *now.* This sort of thing spreads. . . . Ugh! I could n't face it.

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I could n't face Ethel and Jane. Badley! Oh, God! Badley might know! Whisperings. Sniggerings. Lewd jokes. And Dodd? And Ponce? And Pertwee? And Cossett? All of them . . . No, no, no—it 's all right. But it may leak out to-night, to-morrow, the next day. Reputation—gone. Good name—ruined. Slander. Slanderous tongues. I 'm not innocent. Not even innocent. I 'm guilty of . . . of . . . why did I do it? Why did I? Miss Greehalgh with the milk and Madeira cake looking at me coldly, scornfully, contemptuously, knowing all the time. Hermione, Dot, Frank, Camilla . . . little Effie and David . . . innocent little Effie . . . I could n't stand it. I can't go back to my own home. I 'm an outcast. A moral leper. . . .

Hard upon this ever-increasing disquietude came the relaization that he was due to make a neat little speech at the meeting to-morrow, welcoming Sir Eli Smith on his return from his business trip to South America. Norvic House.

I can't. I can't face them. It 's too much. He found himself staring vacantly into a jeweler's window. Bracelets. Red, blue, green bracelets. Ivory. Li'le black elephant bracelets.

He turned away in utter dejection; a dire dejection spliced with fear. He thought of going back to the flat, of "having it out" with Leeta; but he was afraid to face her again. He feared her disdainful "But how exquisitely unforeseen!" attitude. He was terrified of her "Oh, Teddums! Diddums repent?" No, he could not go back to the flat.

Some sort of threat. A veiled threat. Almost a threat to . . . to . . . to . . . well, blackmail? "No, Teddy, not quite the end." What did that mean?

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At last he made his way to the Euston Court Hotel. He had an interview with the manager in which he had to explain the loss of his luggage. Left it in a taxi-cab. Fortunately for Mr. Birtwistle, the manager remembered him and had pity upon his forlorn plight.

The rosy-cheeked chambermaid cheered the heart of Mr. Birtwistle. He liked the Euston Court. It was homely. It enfolded him and protected him from some fearful lurking danger that went whispering through the streets outside. Like a child who runs back to the nursery after a bugaboo panic on the great dark landing, Mr. Birtwistle crept up to his room and got himself to bed. Once again he spent a sleepless night at the Euston Court. Once more he tossed and turned and lay awake, thinking; but this time there was no conscience-stricken *libido*. Abject fear swept away everything except one distressingly dominating dread:

It's bound to leak out!

She might even get me mixed up in some sort of legal tangle. Law courts.

The very sound of the words "law courts" made him squirm.

Newspaper scandal. Ettie. Decree *nisi*. Letters. Divorce case. Misconduct. Have I ever written to Leeta? I did once and tore it up. Did any one find the torn-up scraps in the waste-paper basket . . . in my study? Ethel? Hermione? No, no—so silly. Of course not. So silly. And then a new bugbear chased his mind down endless Lillipot streets:

City Man leads Double Life!

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He sat up because he thought he had screamed for help in a half-dream, but all was quiet except for the distant shriek of an L.M.S. engine. He lay down again. That speech to-morrow. Like a wet rag in the morning. Jaded. Fagged out. I must sleep.

But there was no sleep for him. He got up; fumbled for his Eversharp (present from Hermione) in his waistcoat pocket; found an old envelop, and tried to make notes for his speech.

We all congrat. out Chairman on his [he wrote.] Gleam of hope. Good omen. Indust. outlook.
New spirit in indust.
Sir Eli's optimistic confidence shared by all.

And then he seemed to scribble rubbish:

L 15a FAIR
Fair profits for all if fairjohn
On behalf of B.B.D.&Co. diffIt. times
world needs Brit. Goods good honest
honest Goodchild Goodchild
G Teddy
all make mistakes honest methods
open dealing one with
another
badly needed Badley BADL BADLEY
LEE T A 15a
BADLEY Badley BAD CH I L D

He crept into bed again, dozed, woke up, dozed, woke up, and then fell asleep from sheer mental exhaustion.

The speech at Norvic House was a complete failure. It surprised his co-directors. It was disjointed. It was painfully halting. It was all broken up. He said

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things which had no meaning, and then started again. And he ended:

"I . . . I feel I 've . . . expressed my . . . our feelings rather inadequately—most inadequately—and, well, I hope I 've said enough to ah . . . to ah . . . to ah . . . but perhaps, in any case, I 've said enough to show ah . . . to, ah, show that we all appreciate the . . . ah . . . the ah . . . the welcome . . . the return home, I mean . . . of our Chairman, Sir Eli Smith . . . er . . . amongst us."

It was dreadful. Mr. Birtwistle had fled from the meeting at the earliest possible moment, and he had asked to be excused from the dinner at the Savoy, which was to be the social counterpart of the Norvic House assembly, on the grounds of having to rush off to the bedside of a dying relative. Matter of life and death.

Here he was in the train, going back to Orchard Leigh.

And when, at last, he reached home, and found himself walking up the steps to the front door, the anxiety came out upon him in a clammy heat. His mind was in a constant state of commotion. He tried to slink into the hall without drawing attention, but Ettie had seen him coming up the drive.

"Is that you, Father?"

"Um."

"We did n't expect you till to-morrow, Godwin."

"No, well, I . . . er . . . managed to get away."

"I thought you were going to a dinner at the Savoy?"

"I was, but . . . I managed to get away."

She took his hat and coat and scarf, and waited for him to give her a kiss. He did, but it was a mingey little "*pp!*" He felt he ought never to kiss his wife again.

"You 're tired out, Godwin."

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"M'm, I do' know, my dear. Business worries . . . lot of little bothers."

He wanted to sneak into his study and avoid them all. He could hear Gruff barking at the back of the house. Even Gruff seemed to reproach him.

Mr. Birtwistle was glum. After dinner he managed to retire to his study under the pretext of "going through some papers."

During the next few days Mr. Birtwistle tried to bury himself and his ever-present anxiety in business matters. It could not be done. He bungled things. Once Miss Greenhalgh came back to him with a letter signed:

Yours faithfully,
T. GOODCHILD.

"By Jove! is n't that funny, now!" said Goodwin. "I seem to 've got that man's name on the brain. Ha! Silly mistake. Silly mistake."

Orchard Leigh got on his nerves. He pushed the pouffe behind the Chesterfield so that he might not see it. He hated the sight and the sound of the Baby Austin (which, by the way, Hermione had expropriated from Ettie), and he made roundabout excuses in order not to be driven in it. He avoided the dining-room, except at meal-times, because the miniature Jap garden worried him. He detested the futility of it. Silly little thing, it was. Silly little dwarf tree, and silly ducks. Much rather have a good, honest bowl of roses, or tulips, or something. Tired of it. But Ettie loved it, and he was afraid to express what he felt.

More especially Hermione's Stumpy umbrella put him on edge. And then Dodd began:

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"You seem to've got a fit of the blues these last few days, Birtwistle. 'S matter?"

"Nothing."

"Your little bit given you the bird, eh?" he bantered.

"Don't talk such rot, Dodd."

"Well, you are a poor, miserable devil."

"Nothing the matter with me at all."

"Must be liver . . . salts."

"Don't expect a man to be dancing a hornpipe all day long, do you?"

It was becoming unbearable. It reached its limit on the sixth day after the *Scene in London Flat.*

Mr. Cossett was talking to Mr. Birtwistle about "overhead charges." Miss Greenhalgh was busy going through a letter-file to find a docket from The Selby-Groot Manufacturing Co. which Mr. Birtwistle had asked for. The telephone on Mr. Birtwistle's desk rang. Miss Greenhalgh answered it.

"Yes. Yes. Who is it speaking? Who is it speaking, please? Just a moment; I 'll see." She put her hand over the receiver and turned to Mr. Birtwistle.

"Yes?" said Mr. Birtwistle. Mr. Cossett sat back and twiddled the top of his fountain-pen.

"Some one wants to speak to you, Mr. Birtwistle—a lady's voice—but she won't give her name.".

A flicker of doubt ran through his mind, but he overcame it instantly.

"All right," he said, taking the instrument from her. "Yes? Yes? Mr. Birtwistle speaking now. Who is that? Who? . . . Eh?" The receiver trembled, shook.

"Leeta speaking, Teddy."

He turned a sallow gray. He felt the blood ebb from his lips, and he moistened them.

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Could they hear? Could Miss Greenhalgh and Cossett hear? How on earth did Leeta know his number? What did she want?

"Well?" he said, and gripped the black stem as if it were a poisonous snake. Why not cut off? Put the receiver down? Cut her off, eh? But he thought better of it.

"I 've been expecting to hear from you, Teddy."

(Wish she 'd stop "Teddying!")

"Oh . . . what about?"

"Well, I can't tell you on the 'phone, can I?"

"No?" He had to take care what he said in reply because of Miss Greenhalgh and Cossett.

"Shall I write to you, instead—to Orchard Leigh, Teddy?"

(She knows my home address!)

"No. Certainly not."

"P'r'aps you 'll be coming up to London soon?"

"No. No, I sha'n't. I 'm afraid not. No."

"But how inaccessible! P'r'aps they 'd know at Norvic House, when I could see you?"

"I . . . I 'm really very busy."

"But how incommodious! Still—"

"I really can't talk to you now."

"War 's declared, then, and no Peace Conference, Teddy?"

"Er . . . I don't understand."

"I do hate having to blow the gaff, Teddy."

"What exactly d' you want?"

"Just as much as I can jolly well get."

"You mean—" (*"Will you have another call? Your time 's up."* . . . *"No, thank you."* Click! Buzz! Blur-blur-blur. *Click!*)

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Mr. Birtwistle found himself cut off. He put the receiver down and tried to smile.

"Some people will bother," he said, and then. "Don't even know who it was." But he felt that was a mistake. He tried to put it right. "One of these new clerks at Norvic House, p'r'aps." This was worse. He decided to leave it and say no more.

"If you don't mind, Cossett, we 'll go through this . . . er . . . to-morrow, or . . . or the next day, eh? No hurry, is there? I 've got one or two things . . ."

Then he got rid of Miss Greenhalgh, rather too abruptly.

Something must be done. What am I to do? I can't stand this suspense. I must do something. Now. At once. I don't want to see her. Ettie 'll know. She 'll get to know. She might write to Orchard Leigh, and Ettie always says, "Can I read it, Godwin?" The whole world will know. In the papers. Why did I bring this trouble upon myself? Why was I such a fool?

I want advice. I want to talk it over with . . . with some one who 'll sympathize and understand. Dodd? Impossible. Cossett? No, could n't be done. Pertwee? Out of the question. Frank? My son, Frank? I simply could n't. There 's no one. Not a soul I can turn to.

He paced up and down. He filled his pipe, but did not smoke it. He sat down and glared at the glaring red 6 on the desk calendar.

Of course! Go and see Mr. Pepperdine. Pepperdine the solicitor. Go up to London now and see him. Put it in the hands of my solicitor, eh? Yes. Best thing to do. Get his advice. Queer I had n't thought of that before. See what Pepperdine says.

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Mr. Birtwistle rang the bell.

"I shall be going up to London, Miss Greenhalgh, on the next train. Er . . . some important papers I left, which . . . which I must have. Which I must go through, at any rate. So will you tell Mr. Dodd I've had to run up to London? Back to-morrow morning, I expect. You might just look up a train for me."

He went to the coat-stand near the door, got his overcoat, and fumbled for the armholes, flapping both arms like a penguin. Hat. Scarf.

He came back to his desk, stood irresolute for a moment, and then grabbed the telephone.

"Give me five-four."

Damn, they take such a hell of a time always!

"Hallo? Oh, tell Mrs. Birtwistle I want to speak to her, will you, Ethel? . . . Hallo? That you, Ettie? I've got to go up to London at once . . . forgot some important papers . . . must have them at once . . . so I sha'n't be back. To-morrow. Yes, beastly nuisance, is n't it? Still . . . Well, 'by."

Arnold Pepperdine, solicitor, was an oldish man with silver hair, a high, narrow forehead, a long, pinched-up nose, thin, colorless lips, and sad, dog-like eyes.

"Ah, Mr. Birtwistle," he said, "I 'm glad you 've looked in. Sit down, sit down, Mr. Birtwistle. I 've been wanting to see you about one or two little matters."

Heavens, does he know? Does Pepperdine know? Law courts. . . .

"You remember those title-deeds you asked me to examine?" What a relief!

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Birtwistle, "I remember, of

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course." He was very glad to find the conversation running into another channel.

Mr. Pepperdine explained about the title-deeds. He brought out a copy of them and pointed out certain passages to Mr. Birtwistle.

"So I don't think you need have the least misgivings on *that* score," said Mr. Pepperdine.

"There was another matter I rather wanted to see you about," said Birtwistle, and was unable to begin.

"Oh, about that agreement with the Viking Steel Company?"

"Er . . . yes. Yes."

"I 've had that drawn up for you, but you 'd better let me go through it carefully before you sign it, Mr. Birtwistle. I 'll try to let you have it next week. Then there 's this question of taking up a thousand Pia Nang five per cents. Jackson advised us to wait for a few weeks; so would you like me to see Jackson about that again?"

"Er . . . yes, I think that 's the best plan," said Birtwistle, and again hesitated.

"I don't know that there was anything else, Mr. Birtwistle?" said Mr. Pepperdine looking up.

"Er . . . well . . ." began Birtwistle.

"Of course, I sha'n't take any action about those Ominga Oil Development Shares until I receive instructions from you."

"No. No, that 's right," Birtwistle moistened his lips to begin. It was dreadfully difficult. Mr. Pepperdine was so . . . official.

"Things picking up a bit now, don't you think, Mr. Birtwistle? Foreign trade especially, eh?"

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"Yes, oh, yes, I think so. Yes, I do."

Mr. Birtwistle made no sign of departure. Mr. Pepperdine took off his glasses and looked up expectantly.

"I suppose we all make . . . er . . . mistakes, sometimes," Birtwistle tried.

"Oh, but you've done very well, with M'Bongos, haven't you?"

"Yes. Fact is . . . I wasn't thinking of that."

"No?"

"No. I . . . I wanted your advice—"

"Hang on, Mr. Birtwistle! hang on! Don't you be persuaded to sell out yet."

"I'm a bit bothered, you know."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"There's a matter I want to ask you about."

Mr. Pepperdine resumed his glasses, uncrossed his legs, sat up in his chair, and suddenly became very professional. It put Mr. Birtwistle into a fluster. Things were difficult enough without this professional attitude.

"Now, what can I do to assist you, Mr. Birtwistle?" said the old solicitor.

"It's a little difficult to explain."

"A private matter, I presume?"

"Yes. Oh, yes, it's . . . ah . . . very private." But he could not think how to put it into words.

"Perhaps if you just ran over the chief points," suggested Mr. Pepperdine.

"Yes. Fact is, Mr. Pepperdine, I'm in . . . rather a difficult position."

"Monetary difficulties."

"No. Oh, no. Not monetary." But how could one say it?

"Well, I'm afraid, Mr. Birtwistle, I must ask you to be

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more explicit. I have another client to interview before five o'clock."

"It began . . . over six months ago."

"Yers?"

"I can't think, now, how I came to . . . to be so foolish . . ."

"Arh?"

"One does things without . . . without thinking."

"M'm."

"She seemed to be a . . . a really refined sort of . . . person."

"Perhaps you 'd explain the circumstances, Mr. Birtwistle. It 's difficult for me to grasp the situation without further explanation."

"Yes, of course. The fact is . . . I . . . I took pity on the poor girl and got her a flat."

"Yers?"

"And now . . . she 's . . . well, she 's beginning to bother me."

"A little affair of the heart, I take it?"

"Exactly, Mr. Pepperdine. Exactly."

"I 'm afraid I shall have to ask for the plain facts of the case if you want me to give any advice. Have you lived with this young woman?"

It shocked Mr. Birtwistle. It was like a cold douche down his back.

"Yes, I 've . . . stayed with her."

"I mean, you 've had sexual intimacy with her?"

"Well . . . yes."

"H'm. I take it this has been quite . . . clandestine? Your wife knows nothing of it?"

"Good God! I hope not! It 's awful . . . awful to think of."

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"Now, come, come, Mr. Birtwistle, we must keep to the plain facts of the case. This young woman with whom you have been living is now threatening to make the matter public?"

"Yes."

"Is she—what condition is she in? Is she all right? I must speak plainly, Mr. Birtwistle."

"I think so."

"I mean, bluntly, she 's not likely to have a child, is she?"

Birtwistle was horror-struck. Such a calamity had never even crossed his mind.

"A child! God in heaven! It can't be! It can't be! You don't suggest that . . . ?"

"Well, one must know. It 's a very common occurrence in cases of this kind, and it would naturally complicate things."

"But . . . but . . . you don't . . . you don't seriously suggest such a thing?"

"I 'm simply doing my best, Mr. Birtwistle, to elucidate the plain facts of the case. One must know the facts, however unpleasant, before one can come to any sort of judgment. Now would you be so good as to tell me exactly how you came to be involved in this little indiscretion?"

Godwin pulled himself together. It was a relief, now that the worst was over, to tell the story of "Teddy Goodchild" and Nérédah Leeta Escourt Fairjohn. Mr. Pepperdine listened attentively, nodded, asked a pertinent question whenever Mr. Birtwistle tried to slur over some incident which it was necessary to know, and pressed the tips of his fingers together.

"Well, Mr. Birtwistle," he said, when Godwin had

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finished, "it 's a little awkward. Certainly a little awkward."

"But what ought I to do?"

"You want to get out of it without the least fuss, of course; you can't afford to allow this to become known?"

"I 'd give anything . . . I 'd give untold gold to be free from it all . . . the worry of it . . . the awful suspense of the last few days. It 's driving me mad."

"H'm. I think I could settle it."

"Thank Heavens for that! Thank Heavens it 's—"

"But it 'll cost you . . . a little sum of money, Mr. Birtwistle."

"I don't mind that. I don't mind anything, as long as the awful . . ."

"Yes; well, you 'd better leave it entirely in my hands. I 'll see the girl and do my best to settle it. That 's all I can suggest."

"You 're sure you can do it? You 're sure it won't leak out . . . the papers . . . newspapers . . ."

"I think I can prevent any such unnecessary publicity, Mr. Birtwistle."

"But . . . but . . . when can you do this?"

"I can't manage it to-day. To-morrow I shall be away in Hampshire. But I 'll try to see the girl the following day. Meantime, you 'd better give me a blank check, Mr. Birtwistle. It is impossible to say how much it will cost to buy her off."

He hated the crude commercialism of those last words. Dreadfully businesslike. Buy her off. Godwin produced his check-book, with a shaking hand signed a check, and handed it to Mr. Pepperdine.

"I 'll do what I can," said the old solicitor, rising, "and I dare say I shall be successful. In the meantime, have

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no further communication whatever with this young woman—none whatever. And if she communicates with you again, don't answer it, but send it straight to me."

"And when shall I hear? When shall I know?"

"Well, if I see her the day after to-morrow—let 's see, now I 'd better not write or telegraph to you, had I?"

"No, no! don't . . . don't do that."

"No. Better not. And better not telephone, either. One never knows how these things get known. Look here, Mr. Birtwistle, it 's a very serious matter for you, very serious indeed; I 'll travel up and tell you exactly what 's happened, as soon as I 've fixed things up."

"The same day?"

"Well, I can't promise that, no. Let 's say I 'll come up the following day—in three days' time, that is. I 'll get you out of this little scrape, you trust me."

"But you won't come to Orchard Leigh? You can't come there."

"No, no. I'll come to your office. What time d' you leave?"

"About five-thirty, as a rule. Six, sometimes."

"Well, I 'll come up on the one-three from Euston, and I 'll be at your office about six-fifteen. Wait for me there, Mr. Birtwistle."

"It 's very, very good of you, Mr. Pepperdine."

"Not at all, not at all."

"I can't think how I ever came to do such a—"

"Of course; no. Well, I 'm glad to be able to help you; and I shall see you again very soon. Good-day, Mr. Birtwistle, good-day."

What a relief it was to know that he had placed the whole matter in the hands of his solicitor and that no word of it would leak out. What a relief!

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XIX

MR. BIRTWISTLE BUYS HIS FREEDOM

A GREAT anxiety had fallen from Mr. Birtwistle's mind now that his solicitor had taken the matter in hand.

Mr. Birtwistle had expected this interview to last much longer, and he was surprised by the matter-of-fact attitude of Mr. Pepperdine toward the fall from . . . ah . . . moral rectitude which had led to this difficult situation.

Mr. Pepperdine seemed to take it all for granted, as if it were quite a common occurrence. Perhaps it was? Perhaps these little difficulties *did* arise now and then in . . . well, in the lives of . . . otherwise quite blameless and respectable citizens?

These thoughts flashed through his mind as he made his way from Mr. Pepperdine's private office into the corridor and so downstairs.

As he went down the stairs he decided to go . . . to go back on the night train—book a sleeper, eh?

London—he wanted to get away from London. There was no need for him to be in London. No need at all. He had done the right and proper thing in placing the whole affair in the hands of his solicitor. Quite the right thing. And now it was far better to go home and leave things to be settled in due course, without more ado. Yes.

Truth to tell, London scared Mr. Birtwistle. He was

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afraid to face the Parisienne; terrified to go near the Euston Court. The one was full of lurking memories, and even of . . . well, Leeta might be there; the other was depressing . . . sleepless nights. No. Also, he was a little afraid of himself, left alone in London. One might . . . one might get mixed up again with some girl or other. He felt he could not trust himself just now.

He went into the general office marked "Inquiries" and asked one of Mr. Pepperdine's clerks if he would be so good as to telephone through to Euston and book him a sleeper on the night train for the North. He could have got an earlier train, but Mr. Birtwistle was also a little scared by the thought of Orchard Leigh. He did not want to face Ettie. He did not want to be asked what "important papers" he had wished so urgently to get; why he had come back the same night instead of the next day as he had said; whether everything was all right, and so on. A sleeper on the night train would get him in about six in the morning. He could crawl into his study and do some work before breakfast. He could explain to Ettie that a sleeper was less tiring than hotels; one could cut out the weary train journey by just curling up and going peacefully to sleep. It was all rather muddled because of the conflict in his mind. He wanted to get away from London, and yet he wanted to avoid Ettie at Orchard Leigh, and Dodd at the office. There was nowhere for him to be except on the stretch of L.M.S. railway line between Euston and his own station. The idea of a sleeper attracted him as it had never done before. He wanted the comforting distraction of the train on the lines, singing:

I 'm-going-back—to-Ettie-for-good!
I 'm-going-back—to-Ettie-for-good!

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Yes, he needed that. Anything to avoid the band and the gaiety of the Parisienne. Anything to avoid the awful insomnolence which he felt would be waiting for him at the Euston Court.

Get something to eat at some nice, quiet little place somewhere, and then get the night train North. Don't rush. Take things easy. After all this I need a rest. Nerves get all wrong. Just so easy. Everything 'll come right. Pepperdine 's got it in hand. Sit still and don't worry. People who worry go under.

And then, so slowly he was hardly conscious of it, that insistent anxiety came oozing back. Suppose Mr. Pepperdine failed? Suppose Leeta refused to see him? Suppose Leeta was out when he called? Suppose she refused to say anything at all? Suppose she simply said, "But how legal!" and just smiled at Mr. Pepperdine? What then? Suppose Mr. Pepperdine were too late? Eh? Too late! Day after to-morrow might be too late. She might have . . . have told people by then. Why had n't he urged Mr. Pepperdine to go at once . . . now . . . to-night? Pay him for it! Pay him . . . tell him you 'd pay him a hundred, two hundred. Silly . . . Still, p'r'aps it 'll be all right. I don't know so much. I don't know so much. You can't tell . . .

His thoughts went rambling and sliding in a horrible snakes-and-ladders slither, first one way and then another; but there was no peace of mind anywhere.

It was a dull morning when Mr. Birtwistle arrived at Orchard Leigh. He walked up from the station rather than try to get a taxi from the Grand Imperial Hotel; indeed, he wanted to walk; anything to keep his mind from settling into these ruts and puddles of fear. He came

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along Athelstone Terrace, and then climbed uphill toward Orchard Leigh. He could just see the angle of the gray-green slated roof and one gray stone chimney-stack. It must have been about 6:45 A. M. when he turned in at the drive gates. Gruff set up a frantic barking, which subsided when Mr. Birtwistle reached the white-pillared portico and fumbled with his latch-key. He pushed open the door. Everything was very quiet. He tiptoed into his study, filled his pipe, and sat down to rest.

His thoughts gave him no rest. Worry, worry, worry. He could not free himself from the notion that, somehow or other, the thing would leak out . . . that he had no right—no moral right—to escape from this difficulty without a stain on his character.

While he sat there killing time and wondering when Ethel or Jane would appear, he heard the *k'snapp! bang-bang* of the postman. Something fluttered into the wire letter-box.

Then he heard Jane and Ethel moving about the house. He went out to get the post. One letter. London post-mark. Leeta? *Plip!* It was her close, wriggly hand-writing, he thought; and the thought almost paralyzed him. He took the letter, stuffed it into his pocket, and stood on the front-door mat defiantly. But there was no one to see him. No one had noticed. Then he crept into his study again, closed the door, went over to the window, and took the letter from his pocket.

He tore it open with nervous, snaggy jerks which lacerated the flap of the envelop in little jagged jags. Would he never get it open? Then he saw that it was a very pale-strawberry-pink envelop with a sheet of very pale-strawberry-pink note-paper inside it. Leeta's note-paper. He remembered the day, months ago, when Leeta had

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come back with a box of pale-pink paper and envelops. "Teddy," she had said, "do look at my pinkie-winkie *billet-doux* outfit! Is n't it shrimp?" Those words came back to him now with a tweak of heartbreak. He remembered how particularly charming she had looked at that moment, leaning over the settee . . .

He opened out the pink note-paper, and as he did so a faint fragrance seemed to be exhaled about him, as if the ghost of Nérédah Leeta, wrapped in the little pink envelop, had escaped into the room . . . excruciatingly delicate, an intoxicating tingle of *Trèfle Incarnate*. It called up a thousand regrettable, despicably delightful memories which troubled his innocent, unsullied heart. He felt himself weakening again, wanting her again, wishing it were not all over and . . . and done with; even hoping that this might be a . . . a word of . . . love. Ah, well . . .

A whiff of breakfast coffee and sizzling bacon rashers came seeping in from the kitchen. Then he read:

15a Lillipot Street, W.

TEDDY:

Please send me the money for the next quarter's rent which falls due on Monday.

LEETA.

P. S. You can send me a check now, can't you, now I know your real name?

He heard Ethel going upstairs with the morning tea; two cups on a little tray, with a tiny tea-pot, and two wafers of bread and butter.

The urgent fear, which had gripped the heart of Mr. Birtwistle and sent him post-haste to seek advice from Mr. Pepperdine, fell upon him again. It came upon him with a sort of physical weakness, a sensation of disem-

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bodiment. He stood reading that "pinkie-winkie *billet-doux*" a second and a third time.

So confused were his thoughts that, for a moment, he felt a sickening apprehension. Mr. Pepperdine had failed! It was all over.

He remembered immediately that, of course, Mr. Pepperdine had not yet visited Leeta, and that this note had been written yesterday—while he was explaining the situation to Mr. Pepperdine, perhaps.

Suppose I had n't happened to travel back on the night train? Suppose I had n't been here to . . . to snatch this from the letter-box? Suppose Ettie had taken it? She always opened and read his letters when he was away; it was part of the Orchard Leigh tradition. What a merciful Providence had saved him from that! Ettie! Ettie would have opened it . . . the little pink envelop . . . scented . . . and . . . and then—God!—what then? The very thought of it made him stare blankly out of the window at the tennis lawn.

He put the letter back into his coat pocket.

All through breakfast that letter tormented him. Surely when he moved, Ettie or Hermione would hear it crumple? It would not have surprised him if Ettie had said: "Godwin, what is that letter you have hidden in your pocket?"

And when she actually looked up, after ringing the bell for some more milk, and said:

"Was n't there any post this morning, Godwin?" he was unable to go on spreading marmalade on his toast.

"I . . . I don't think so, my dear," he said, and felt that Ettie, and Hermione, and the coffee-pot, and the toast-rack, and the empty milk-jug, were all going to scream: "Oh, Father! That 's a wicked, wicked falsehood!"

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Just then in came Ethel.

"Ethel, was n't there any post this morning?" Ettie asked.

"Well 'm, I did n't look, but I heard the postman put something through and knock. I 'll go and see 'm."

"Er . . . now I come to think of it, my dear, there was something or other—a circular-thing, ha' penny stamp, nothing. I threw it away. It was no good. Rubbish. Pure rubbish."

"Daddy, it was n't a sale catalogue was it, 'cos I *do* want to see them?" pouted Hermione.

"No, no, no," said Mr. Birtwistle, irritably. "It was . . . some sort of circular. I 've told you. One of these . . . money-lender things. Worthless rubbish. I . . . I . . . burnt it. No, no, I tore it up and threw it away. I hate the things. They 've no business to send them. Disgraceful!"

But after that he could not finish his toast. Ugh! toast and marmalade! How can any one eat toast and marmalade?

"My dear, you have n't eaten your toast; is n't it nice? Is it rather too crisp?"

"Somehow, I 'm . . . not really hungry this morning."

"But you must be starving, Godwin; you 've had nothing since you started from London."

"Er . . . I 've . . . had quite enough breakfast. Over-eating lately, I think. Heavy breakfasts . . . not good for any one. We all eat too much. Much too much."

At the office he found it impossible to settle down to work. Dodd came in and said:

"What on earth choo want to go scooting up to London for yesterday?"

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"Er . . . papers. Did n't Miss Greenhalgh tell you? Some papers I left—"

"But there was nothing so important as all that?"

"Er . . . yes, there was. Oh, yes, there was. Some . . . some private notes of my own. Notes I 'd made. At a meeting. And I wanted them. I particularly wanted them." Mr. Birtwistle glared at Mr. Dodd.

"Oh," said Dodd. "Well, I 'm blessed if I 'd gone up for that. Still, nothing to me, course," and went off.

During the day Mr. Birtwistle kept feeling his coat to make sure the little pink envelop was still there. Going back to Orchard Leigh in the car he took it out and re-read it. He put it back in his overcoat pocket.

After all I 've done for the girl she simply writes, "Please send money." . . . Money, money, money. That 's all she wants—money.

I always felt there was something . . . well . . . just a little common, unladylike, about her. One never felt she was quite well-bred, somehow. A streak of . . . of vulgarity, sometimes, that rather revolted me. There 's a difference, somehow; one can always tell a really refined, well-bred girl. Leeta lacked just that indefinable something. It always shows itself in the end. Money. "Please send me the money." No. Not one penny. Not one. Not after this. No.

This mock bravery did not last long. Before the car had swished up the gravel drive to Orchard Leigh, Mr. Birtwistle was in the same deep despondency mixed with the same morbid consternation.

Ettie was waiting in the hall to take his hat and coat and scarf. She helped him off with his coat. Then he remembered . . . letter . . . in pocket!

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"Don't you . . . bother, Ettie. No, don't you do it. I'll hang it up. I'll hang it up."

"But why? I always do."

"No, no; I'll do it. I'll do it, Ettie." But she had taken it and carried it away to the cloak-room. Godwin went after her. He could not let the coat go out of his sight. He watched her hang it up. He pretended to fiddle about with a pair of shoes.

"Er . . . I wonder whether to get crêpe soles put on these," he said, by way of filling up the silence.

"Oh, but they're such wretched old things. Godwin, what *are* you doing in here? You must be so tired."

"No . . . not very." He wanted to rescue that pale-pink envelop; he feared she might even sniff the faint odor of scent as she hung the coat up. It was useless. Ettie shooed him out of the cloak-room, brought his slippers, and set him in his arm-chair.

At last he said, "Think I left my pipe . . . study," and went out. He almost ran to the cloak-room, plunged his hand in the pocket, and rescued the envelop.

Burn it, of course, burn it! Why on earth didn't I destroy it at the office? How'm I to get rid of it? No fire in the study. Tear it up in tiny, tiny scraps and drop it into the waste-paper basket?

But Mr. Birtwistle had read modern detective fiction in which one tiny triangle of pale-pink note-paper would give the clue to a complete murder mystery. No. It's safer not.

"Godwin, what *are* you doing out there?"

"I think," he said as he came back, "I'll just go and look at my rubbish-heap fire and see how it's going. Sha'n't be long, Ettie."

"Not now, Godwin!"

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"Yes, I sha'n't be a moment. I rather want to see whether it 's still smoldering nicely."

An idea had come to him. He would burn the letter in the rubbish-heap fire. No one would ever find it after that. It was the safest thing to do.

He put on his hat and went out. The rubbish-heap fire was still smoldering nicely, a whiffle of grayish smoke blowing down over the kitchen garden. Mr. Birtwistle poked the fire and made a place where the pale-pink envelop could be destroyed. He took it out and pushed it carefully into the gray ashes in the hope that it would catch alight. He stood watching it, determined not to leave the spot until he had seen it entirely consumed. The fire singed one corner but would not burn. Then he brought out a box of matches, took the letter from its envelop, and spread them on the ground. The first match blew out. The second match lit the envelop and it burned crookedly in a curling, crinkling black flutter. It seemed as if the letter refused to light. He tried again. At last it singed brown at the edge and burst into flame. The next moment a gust of wind lifted it, extinguished the flame, and sent the sheet of pink note-paper galopading like some idiotic dream lapwing right across the kitchen garden.

Mr. Birtwistle, filled with a childish, uncontrollable dread, plunged over cabbages, broke through raspberry canes, and trampled across the strawberry bed in pursuit. At first it seemed as if the flying, fluttering, folding piece of half-burnt note-paper would be carried over into the fields beyond. It struck terror into Mr. Birtwistle's soul. He went recklessly after it, and as he went he had a foolish fear lest Ettie and Hermione and Jane and Ethel

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and Badley and Gruff should all come running out, shouting: "What *are* you doing, Godwin?"

It came to rest like a dead leaf in the doorway of the potting-shed. Part of it was burnt away, but he could still read clearly the words:

15a. Lillipot Street, W.

. . . he money for the next quarter's rent
. . . n Monday.

LEETA.

. . . an send me a check now, can't you, now I
. . . eal name?

Thank God it did n't get away! He grabbed at it and put it into his pocket. But he had not the courage to go back and try again. He slunk indoors in the hope of being able to destroy it in the drawing-room fire without being noticed.

"Gracious, Godwin, look at your boots! What *have* you been doing?" cried Ettie. In his distress Mr. Birtwistle had come blundering in without using the scraper or the mat.

"Good Lord, Daddy! look at the carpet!" Hermione called to him.

"Been looking at the . . . the raspberry canes; they 're quite all right. I wanted to see how they were, rather. Er . . . Badley thought one of them was . . . was dead.

Then he went away, quickly, to take off his boots. They were clogged with rich brown garden mold. It fell off at each step.

He came back, made bold by desperation, with a little crumple of paper in his hand. He sat down in his armchair, took out his pipe, knocked it sharply three times—

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tat-at-at!—in the fireplace, blew down it, and then, before the very eyes of Ettie and Hermione, tossed the scrap of paper into the flames! In a moment it was consumed and went flying up the chimney in tiny black wafers.

He went on with his pipe operations.

Done it! Got rid of it! No one 'll ever know. It 's gone—up the chimney. Burnt.

For a few moments he felt a little more at ease, and then a new anxiety took hold of him which made everything a thousand times worse.

What was it Mr. Pepperdine had said? "Have no further communication whatever with this young woman. . . . And if she communicates with you again, send it straight to me." And he had burnt it! It ought to have been sent on at once to Mr. Pepperdine. This young woman had communicated with him again, and instead of sending it on to his solicitor, he had destroyed it! Might ruin everything. Never ought to 've burnt the thing. If Mr. Pepperdine had only had that note demanding more money—insolently demanding more money with a . . . a covert threat insinuated— What a fool! Why on earth did I destroy it? Evidence. Important evidence. Conclusive proof. In black and white.

It worried him all through dinner; and just before bed, Ettie said:

"Godwin, are you *sure* you would n't like your Ovaltine to-night? It would do you such a lot of good. You have n't had it for months."

"Er . . . no. No, Ettie, I 'd rather not. Much rather not."

The following day Mr. Pepperdine was to see Nérédah Leeta. Mr. Birtwistle awoke with a slow headache; a

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headache that throbbed a monotonous *ump-clank-fump*. The beautiful spring sunshine, instead of enfolding him in its joyous efflorescence, depressed him.

He looked out of the bath-room window and saw the vivid scintillation of mauve and yellow crocuses amongst the emerald green grass. They might have been repulsive fungoid eruptions for all the response they aroused in Mr. Birtwistle's heart.

He was glad to look away and give his attention to his Gillette safety razor. He heard Hermione whistling the lilt of

Open up a—
case of—
canned kisses!

and he wanted to rush out and shout: "Shut up! Shut up whistling that wretched tune, Hermione! I can't stand it!"

When he saw his face reflected thrice in the threefold shaving mirror, he saw a haggard oblong with two bulging, weary, sleep-laden eyes.

His mind wandered away to London; to Mr. Pepperdine's office; to Fifteen A Lillipot Street, W. He tried to imagine the interview. He saw Leeta wearing his pearl necklace, with the li'le black elephant bracelet falling about her wrist.

The odor of his Palmoline Shaving Cream turned to that subtle perfume which haunted the "dinkums li'le cube of a flat." Then he remembered that Mr. Pepperdine would not have started yet. What time would he climb those stone steps? Would he go this morning, or this afternoon? It was miserable being left in this state of suspense.

Even after the interview was all over, he would not

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know the result . . . Not till to-morrow. Not until 6:15 or 6:30 to-morrow. The whole of today and most of to-morrow to get through, somehow. Every moment seemed to drag. Oh, curse! I've nicked a pimple. Blade's as blunt as blazes.

A sparrow fluttered from twig to twig outside, chirping with contemptuous cheeriness: *Efty-boy! Efty-boy! Kiss? Kiss? Yucatan-kiss!*

In the midst of re-lathering his square, dimpled chin, Mr. Birtwistle suddenly let his great badger-hair shaving-brush slip into the basin, wiped the Palmoline foam from his face and, clad as he was in his Jaeger dressing-gown, crept out of the bath-room door. He looked this way and that, listened for any sound below, and made a bolt downstairs. No, there was nothing in the wire letter-box. Nothing. He was much relieved. For a second or two he had been terror-struck lest Leeta might have begun a daily bombardment. He fled upstairs again, and as he went fear came upon him from another angle: perhaps Ethel, or Ettie, or Hermione had already taken the letters! Suppose that had happened.

At the top of the stairs Ettie came out of the bedroon.

"What *are* you doing, Godwin?"

"Er . . . I . . . I just remembered I had n't wound up the . . . the little clock in the study." It was very weak. Ettie looked at him questioningly. "I hate clocks to run down," he added; "it's bad for them." Then he disappeared into the seclusion of the bath-room, to finish his shaving operations.

The whole of that day was sheer misery for Mr. Birtwistle. The anxiety steadily intensified as the day dragged to an end. Three times he sat staring at the telephone on his desk. Ring up? Ring up Mr. Pepper-

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dine and find out what's happened? No, better not.

Doubts came crowding one upon another. All very well for Mr. Pepperdine to say, "I can settle it, you leave it to me," but could he? Nérédah Leeta was not just an —not the sort of girl Mr. Pepperdine might imagine. Mr. Pepperdine was only human, after all. What could he do? Suppose Leeta simply scorned the money that Mr. Pepperdine would draw with his blank check, and . . . and went on pestering?

Now and then his mind looked at it from quite a different position: Is n't it rather a dirty trick to send a solicitor? Have I done right in allowing Mr. Pepperdine to . . . to know all about it? Is it safe even with Mr. Pepperdine? Was n't it a bit hard on the girl to . . . well . . . land her in a flat and then desert her? How could she pay the rent and the other expenses? What would become of her? Would she be dragged down? Was he saving his own good name at her expense? Would she be forced to . . . fellows like Efty-boy?

But one simply *had* to do something. It could not go on like this.

At last it was time to leave the office. He dreaded the evening at Orchard Leigh, and still more the long, restless night.

What struck him as so astonishing was the fact (which dawned upon him afresh every hour or so) that none of the people about him knew what was going on in his mind; none of them had ever heard of Nérédah Leeta Escourt Fairjohn; none of them knew that . . . that he had taken a flat in London; none of them knew that he . . . that he had made a little slip; and none of them knew of this long-drawn-out suspense, waiting, waiting, waiting, for news from Mr. Pepperdine. Miss Green-

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halgh, Dodd, Pertwee, Cossett, Brown, and the rest—none of them knew. Not one.

And then there were moments when he doubted that; when he was sick with fear lest some whisper of it all had actually leaked out.

He found himself looking at Badley suspiciously.

"You 'eard the rumor that's got about, sir?" said Badley as he opened the door of the Daimler. Mr. Birtwistle felt himself stagger. They know! They all know! God! God! they know what I've done!

"What rumor, Badley?"

"They say Perks in the 'Igh Street gone broke—bank-crup'."

(Thank Heavens for that! Thank Heavens that's all!)

"Oh? I had n't heard," said Mr. Birtwistle, getting in.

"Well, there may be no truth in it; but that's what I bin told, sir."

It's all right. It's all right. It's all right. It's all right. Oh, thank Heavens it's all right. It's all right.

These last few months Mr. Birtwistle had not stayed late at the office, and there was nothing to keep him this evening. Miss Greenhalgh became fidgety soon after 5:30. She could not understand it, and she did not like to go in case she might be wanted. Mr. Birtwistle kept looking through old letter-files, looking out of the window, and then going back to his desk. He seemed to want to find something to do. He had forgotten all about Miss Greenhalgh. His mind kept repeating: only an hour to go, now. He 'll be here at 6:30. I shall know then. A whole hour before Pepperdine arrives. One more hour of waiting.

"Will you be working late, Mr. Birtwistle?"

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"Er . . . yes. Yes, I shall, Miss Greenhalgh. Yes."

"Will you want me, d' you think?"

"Oh, no. No, I don't think so. No."

"You 're quite sure? Because I can easily stay if—"

"Oh, no, no. Don't. Don't stay. I shall be all right. I mean I can get on with . . . one or two things. One or two things I rather want to go through quietly . . . and settle. No need for you to stay, Miss Greenhalgh."

Miss Greenhalgh disappeared.

"Hallo," said Dodd, "you still here? I 'm just going."

"Yes; well, I 've one or two things I want to go through to-night. It 's quieter when Miss Greenhalgh and the rest of them have gone. No chatter or people interrupting, coming in and out. Can think things out."

"Well, good night, old man!"

"Good night, Dodd!"

Mr. Dodd disappeared.

He heard Brown say, "Good night, Miss Greenhalgh," and the slam of a door. He heard the two typists chattering together as they put on their things.

"Gracious, it 's five and twenty to, Florrie."

"I know. I meant to be early this evening."

Then they disappeared. Pertwee and Cossett, at the other end of the building, would have gone by now. Peace and quiet, at last.

Quarter to six. Three quarters of an hour to wait. Mr. Birtwistle could not sit still. He poked up the fire and put a shovelful of coal on it. He looked out at the window and saw the Daimler and Badley below, waiting to take him home. He had forgotten to tell Badley not to come for him this evening.

Glad of something to do, Mr. Birtwistle went down

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and told Badley that he would be working late this evening and that there was no need to wait. He would 'phone for a taxi home, later, from the Grand Imperial.

"Oh, and will you tell Mrs. Birtwistle I . . . may not be in until . . . until . . . see now . . . until eight or half-past, perhaps. I 've a good deal to get through this evening. That 'll save me ringing up Orchard Leigh. I 'm not certain when I 'll be done, so I 'll get a taxi back. Yes, I'll get a taxi. You need n't wait about for me."

Then he went back to his office. Twelve minutes to six. Only three minutes gone.

The glass of milk and the slice of Madeira cake were still on the mantelpiece. He had not touched them. Miss Greenhalgh had said, "You have n't had your milk, Mr. Birtwistle," and he had replied: "No . . . no. I may, later on."

The nervous tension was too great. He paced up and down the office, sat in his chair, got up, looked at the clock, locked his desk, and paced up and down again.

Mrs. Gibbons, the charwoman, came blundering in with pail and floor-rag. She startled Mr. Birtwistle.

"Oh, I 'm sorry, sir," she said. "I did n't know any one was in, I 'm sure," and off she went to "do out" Dodd's office instead.

Ten past six. Mr. Pepperdine would arrive in twenty minutes. Twenty age-long minutes to wait.

He tightened his tie, screwed the top on the "Grip-Fix" Office Paste, tidied up his desk, looked out of the window, and blew his nose, hard, so that it resounded like a fog-horn through the empty building.

Five and twenty past. Five minutes to go. Only five more minutes.

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Mrs. Gibbons tapped at the door.

"Yes, yes; come in."

"I just wondered if you was still 'ere, sir. I 'll take the waste-paper basket."

Mr. Birtwistle sat down at his desk and pretended to be working. Dumb charades for Mrs. Gibbons's benefit. Mrs. Gibbons seemed to resent his being there. She became the All-Powerful Charwoman Goddess. She wanted him swept out of it. He had no right to be lingering about doing nothing in his own office after half-past five or six o'clock at the latest. She wanted to "get on" and get the place "cleaned up." At any moment now, Mr. Pepperdine might arrive.

Footsteps? . . . Was it? Only Mrs. Gibbons along the passage.

Six thirty! He checked the office clock by his own watch. The clock was one minute fast. One more minute to go. Was his watch right? Of course, Mr. Pepperdine might be a minute or two late. Any moment, now. He would know the worst in a moment, now.

At a quarter of seven dismay, doubt, and fear increased intolerably. Would Mr. Pepperdine never come? Perhaps he was outside. Perhaps the door was locked. He went down to see. No, it was just ajar. He looked up and down the street. Not a sign of Mr. Pepperdine.

Seven o'clock came, and there was still no sign. Mr. Birtwistle became so uneasy that he could not pace up and down. He went into the adjoining office and pulled open the smoothly sliding drawers of a khaki enameled all-steel filing-cabinet. He pulled them open and pushed them back. Then he pulled the tin cover off Miss Florrie

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Jones's Remington and tapped on one key so that it marked the roller—

ggggggggg gg g ggg ggggg g

Mrs. Gibbons coming back! He tried to fit the black tin cover over the machine noiselessly, but it clanked and clinked and clattered. He fled back to his own room.

As if to make him still more miserable, some wretched hurdy-gurdy began at breakneck speed and so suddenly that every nerve in his body jumped:

Bower Bird, Billee—(*bang!*)
So!
WouldnchoolikeetoYucatanwithme?
(*Diddy-de-dumty*
Diddy-de-dumty—Dee!
Ta-Dee!)

Seven-fifteen, and not a sign of Mr. Pepperdine. What could have happened? Missed the train? Might have missed the 1:03 from Euston. The next train did not get in until 7:31 P. M. Was he coming? Was there a hitch? Something had gone wrong? It had got into the papers. . . . Scandal? He wanted to rush out and get a paper.

It was not until five minutes to eight that Mr. Pepperdine arrived. Mrs. Gibbons met him on the stairs and showed him up.

Mr. Birtwistle made a final effort not to pull his eyebrows and not to keep fiddling with a cuff-link.

Mr. Pepperdine closed the door.

"I 'm sorry I—"

"Is it all right? Have you—"

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"I 'm sorry I 'm late, Mr. Birtwistle, but I missed the one-three from Euston."

"Er, yes . . . er . . . you . . . you . . . ?'

"Smoke?"

"Not for me, no, not for me. I hope you 've—"

"Shall we sit down? I expect it 's been a bit of a strain waiting to hear the news, Mr. Birtwistle?"

"I must know! I must—is it settled?"

"I am happy to say that I have arranged everything quite satisfactorily from every point of view, Mr. Birtwistle."

"Thank God for that!"

Mr. Birtwistle sat back in his office chair as if he were stunned. "'Ank Go' f' that . . ." he mumbled.

"It has cost you the sum of five thousand pounds, Mr. Birtwistle."

"Never mind that. Never mind that. I 'm free, at last!"

"I 'm very glad to have been able to help you in . . . ah . . . this little predicament, Mr. Birtwistle. Very glad indeed."

"You don't know what it 's been these last few days! You don't know what it 's been. Torture! Oh, it 's been fearful—the suspense of it all."

"Well, it 's all over now, Mr. Birtwistle, so you can take heart and forget about it."

"To think that I could do such a . . . such a . . ."

"Yes. I shall have to be getting back to London on the next train, Mr. Birtwistle, so I think I 'll leave you now. There 's nothing more to be done. I have a written statement signed by the young woman, so that there 's no need to fear any sort of recurrence of this incident in the

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future. You can set your mind at rest. Well, I 'll be getting along. Good night, Mr. Birtwistle. You 'll find everything 's all right now."

There was a kindly glow in the old solicitor's eyes as he shook hands. Tears seemed to well up in Mr. Birtwistle's eyes and blur everything. He shook hands mechanically.

"I can't . . . thank you . . . I can't . . ." he stammered.

When he recovered from the emotional shock he was alone.

"It 's like a bad dream, it 's like a bad dream," he kept repeating to himself.

A desire to go home—home, to Ettie, to Hermione, Gruff, Badley, Ethel, Jane, every one—overcame the inertia of this sudden release from his mental Tophet.

He experienced that indescribable spiritual exultation which springs from a sense of sinfulness washed away by intense anguish. Now that there was no need of it, his conscience "came to," took possession, and found itself induing an almost saintlike Birtwistle.

"I 've done wrong," it psalmed within his innermost being, "but I 've been given another chance . . ."

The taxi scrunched to a standstill. Mr. Birtwistle got out.

"Is that you, Father?"

"Yes, my dear."

Out came Ettie from the sitting-room. She took his hat and coat and scarf, and waited to be kissed. Godwin kissed her tenderly, with a devotional surge that was akin to religious ecstasy.

"You must have had such a long, tiring day at the office, Godwin."

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Immediately Mr. Birtwistle felt a delightful weariness overcoming him; he was blissfully fagged out. For once in his life he was really exhausted.

"Yes," he said; "very tiring day, my dear . . . very tiring."

His slippers were ready for him. He slipped them on.

"Hullo, Daddy!"

"Well, Hermione . . ."

He sat for a little while in his arm-chair. Kindliness and Consideration wrapped him about, and he was glad.

Well," he said, "I 'll go up and wash now."

"You 'll find a clean towel put out ready for you, Godwin, on the radiator."

"Oh, that 's good . . . thanks." He made for the door.

"Don't be long, will you, Godwin?"

"No, my dear. Down in a minute."

Mr. Birtwistle lingered and played about in the bathroom. He let the hot-water tap run until it gushed and guggled. Then he let the cold tap run, smoothly, gently. Too cold. More hot. It thrilled him.

An overwhelming compassion toward all living things on earth swept him into cosmic unity with life itself.

An inarticulate thanksgiving service sang in wordless harmony with the quintessence of Orchard Leigh.

Once only a sharp pang of remorse shot through this Narvānic beatitude: If only it had never happened. If only I had nothing to . . . to hide from Ettie.

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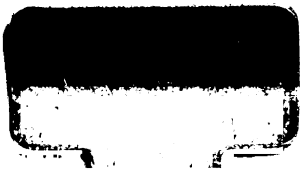

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